



BABY

for my

Dad's best friend

ANNIE J. ROSE

BABY FOR MY DAD'S BEST FRIEND

AN AGE GAP, SECRET BABY ROMANCE

ANNIE J. ROSE

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DESCRIPTION

**Aiden Cross is my dad's best friend
And he just became my boss.
He's so off limits it isn't even funny
But I'm not laughing.**

I've been in love with him for as long as I can remember.
He's always been my dad's best friend,
And now he's a handsome, hot shot marketing CEO.
Dominating a business I'm just starting out in,
And dominating my every thought.

I never thought I had a shot with him,
But the way he looks at me lately makes me wonder.
I know he thinks he'd be double crossing my dad,
But we can't keep deceiving ourselves.
Even if giving in means we burn every bridge,
I want him and he wants me,
And we can't deny it much longer.

**I never should have let myself get this close to the fire,
But now that I'm here, I can't help it.
I want to get burned.**

CHAPTER 1

LAYLA



O h no. No no no no.

Maybe it's not—

Christian opened the box and cleared his throat.

Please let this be a nightmare.

“Layla Annelise Davis, these last three years have been the best of my life—”

Really? I mean, they'd been fun, sure, but the best?

“—you are everything I ever hoped I'd find. A best friend, a lover—”

Are people watching? Oh my God, they are. This cannot be any more embarrassing.

“—and if you say yes, I'll spend my life making you as happy as you've made me.”

I should have moved out months ago.

My face flushed hot even as ice water trickled through my veins, freezing me in place. The speech was over. This was my cue. Wide smiles gleamed in my periphery. The low hum of conversation had been replaced by an expectant

silence. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation. Hands were already halfway out of laps, ready to clap.

Why did he have to do this in a public place?

Because Christian liked an audience. He was an athlete. He was used to performing for the feedback of a crowd.

I licked my lips nervously. The silence was stretching out too long. Smiles were dimming. Hands were lowering. People were exchanging wide-eyed glances. Christian hiked the corners of his mouth up another centimeter and held his position. He was used to plays that came down to the buzzer. He was the master of the last minute, game winning shot.

“Christian,” I whispered, my voice barely eking out of the throat that had closed up right around the time he slid off his chair and reached into his pocket. “I don’t want to do this here.”

His expectant smile cracked. That answer wasn’t in the playbook. He didn’t know how to respond. “Layla,” he said urgently, lowering his voice. “I’m asking you to marry me.”

I trenched my fingers into my dark hair at the temples. A wild, inappropriate urge to laugh came over me. Only Christian would mansplain a proposal, as if the ring and the speech hadn’t been enough clues. And it was a very nice ring, I couldn’t help but notice. Guilt roiled in my stomach. Could you return an engagement ring?

“I know you are,” I whispered back. “But I just don’t know if I’m ready.”

Yes, that was a good response. If we’d been alone, I could have told him the truth—that I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to marry him. We could have done this cleanly, but now I had to prolong it.

“But you will be one day?” he prompted, still holding the ring out. “So we can have a long engagement.”

Feeling like someone had stuffed my skull with sandbags, I slowly shook my head. “I’m not even ready to be engaged.”

Around us, some diners tried to pretend like they hadn’t even noticed the

large 6'4" man down on one knee, holding a ring. The clink of silverware on porcelain resumed. Some diners, though, continued to stare, agog. Was this really happening? How *fantastic*. They were already turning it into the story they'd tell their friends. They were wondering if they could discreetly pull out their phones and film the rest.

Maybe it was because I'd worked in public relations for the last two years, but my fear of becoming a viral meme kicked in. I had to end this *now*. I reached out—mistake, Christian thought I was extending my hand for the ring. His face lit up and he started to extract it from the box.

I hurriedly switched hands and grabbed him around the wrist. "Let's finish this at home," I hissed, tugging him to his feet. In the commotion, the ring box snapped shut. The sound loosened some of the pressure in my chest. It felt like we'd managed to put a lid on Pandora's box. It tightened right back up again, though, when I saw the look on Christian's face.

Disbelief.

Devastation.

He wasn't fooled by my delay tactics.

He'd heard the answer in everything I hadn't said.

Unlike me, though, Christian didn't work in public relations. This didn't make him want to get home as soon as possible. He had to get to the bottom of this *now*, and he wasn't scared of his expression getting slapped underneath a caption that read something stupid like *My face when _____*.

"Layla, don't you want to marry me?" His voice was loud. People around us winced into their forty-dollar entrees. The woman beside us gave up on discretion and pulled out her phone, licking her lips like this was the dessert course.

I played out the possible scenarios in my head. I could continue giving Christian evasive responses, but he would continue pressing the issue. Or I could tell him the truth, cold and clean and cutting, and end this now. Christian liked it when I kept things vague—it meant he could pretend to misunderstand. And that is exactly how we ended up here.

If I wasn't clear now, I'd end up with a husband to go along with a couch I didn't like and a dog that didn't like me.

Steeling myself, I forced myself to speak without thinking of the myriad consequences of my words. "No, Christian, I don't want to marry you." Apologies and explanations burred up, but I clamped my lips closed tightly. I couldn't give him an opening. He'd slide a reason to say *yes* into it, push, and before I knew it, I'd be asking my brother and best friend to be at my wedding party.

The emotions that ran across his face broke my heart. For a crazy second, I thought about taking it all back. Christian would accept whatever bizarre explanation I gave him for my initial refusal. Momentary insanity. A blackout—what even just happened? Is that a ring? We could make this nice again.

But then I thought about standing up in front of all our family and friends, and I had to swallow back the panic that clawed its way up my throat. I stood up suddenly, and the black cloth napkin dropped out of my lap. I tugged Christian to his feet, and he stared down at me, hurt and confusion all over his face. His mouth worked, but he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

The waiter sidled up and slid the bill on the table, glancing guiltily away when we both turned to look at him. The faux leather folder sat beside the dessert plate. The white chocolate mousse cake was untouched, the words *Will you marry me* were still written in a chocolate cursive drizzle around the edge of the plate. My vision blurred as I realized they hadn't ended with a question mark but rather an exclamation point.

As though my *yes* was a forgone conclusion.

Christian's hand entered my field of vision. He was reaching for the check. Horror swept through me at the thought of him paying for this debacle.

"I'll get it." I grabbed for the bill, but he already had a hold of it.

"No, I will," Christian said with a pained smile. "This was my—"

Mistake.

"—idea."

“Please. Let me.” I tugged on my end.

Christian refused to let go. He shoved the ring box back in his pocket so he could get hold of his side with two hands. “No,” he said again, this time through clenched teeth. “*I’ve got it, Layla.*”

Still holding on to my side with one hand, I extracted my credit card from my small purse with the other and waved it at the waiter.

“No, don’t take that.” Alarmed, Christian let go with both hands and went for his wallet, but the ring box was on top of it. He had to pull the ring out—again—to get to it.

We both thrust out our cards at the waiter, who looked from one to another like he was being presented with a gun and a hand grenade.

“Take mine,” I insisted, jamming it in the folder and waggling it at him.

“No, mine.” Christian pushed the folder away with one hand and tried to drop his credit card into the waiter’s apron pocket.

At the table closest to us, I saw the woman’s eyes had gone wide with horror, but her date’s shoulders were shaking. I didn’t blame either of them. I wanted to laugh and scream at the same time.

“Umm, you know what?” The waiter held his hands up, palms out, like he was pacifying two rabid dogs. “I have an idea.”

He was going to ask the manager to comp it. The part of me that was making fifteen dollars an hour and living off a thousand dollars a month exhaled with relief. I couldn’t afford this meal that was going to add up to two hundred dollars with tip. I’d have done it rather than let Christian pay it, but it would have hurt.

The words *thank you* were on the tip of my tongue, but before I could speak, he continued, “I’ll split it down the middle.” Neatly snatching both cards seemingly at once, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the back.

Christian sat down heavily, and not knowing what else to do, I sat down, too.

“I got the lobster tail and you didn’t,” he said, blinking rapidly. “I’ll Venmo you for it.”

I dropped my head into my hands and pressed the ridge of my palms into my cheekbones. “Please don’t.”

We were quiet for a long time. The waiter came back, this time with two folders. He dropped one on each side of the table and said, “Have a great night.”

I heard Christian snort weakly and looked up, catching his eye. He looked dazed, like someone had hit him really hard and then shone a spotlight in his eyes to see if the pupils were dilating normally. Somehow, though, he managed to smile crookedly at me.

“That didn’t go like I thought it would.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He jerked his shoulders in a careless shrug, started to say something, and then we both fell silent again. The white chocolate mousse was still a perfect triangle between us, but neither of us reached for one of the long-handled spoons.

“What do we do now?” he asked, and I knew he wasn’t talking about the dessert or the bill. He was asking the Big Question. What were we going to do about the myriad ways we’d entwined our lives, the tangible threads that had bound us together even as I’d felt the desire to drift apart?

“I think...” I blinked rapidly, hardly able to believe what I was about to say. “I think I’m going to move home.”

Home was Boston, Massachusetts. Home was long, frozen winters that started in September and went clearly through April. When I left seven years ago, it was with the intention of living and dying in the California sun. Lately, though, I’d felt a longing for my hometown. The distinct accent I’d spent the first year of college shedding, the cobblestone streets of Beacon Hill, lobster rolls and Red Sox games. I even looked forward to a good old fashioned snowy winter.

Christian gave me a funny look, and I realized I was smiling.

“I’m definitely going to move home,” I decided, then and there.

Christian's face was composed in an expression of tragic nobility. "If you love someone, let them go," he said.

I couldn't think of anything to say to that, but it reminded me of something.

Of *someone*.

And for the first time in years, I let myself think about Aiden Cross.

CHAPTER 2

AIDEN



You're not supposed to think about divorce on your wedding day. It's not good form to stand up at the altar, look at the beautiful woman in a stunning white gown in front of you, and think, *shit, maybe this wasn't a good idea*. You aren't supposed to kiss her and wish you were at an airport instead of a church, about to fly off to somewhere very, very far away.

You definitely shouldn't gaze down at her while she's saying her vows and scan her pupils frantically for any hint that she feels the same way you do. And when you say *I do*, your stomach shouldn't feel like it's about to fall out of your ass.

I felt every inch of how wrong my life was the day I married Shara. I'd sensed it now and then, lying next to her in bed, but I'd shoved it away. It was too fucking inconvenient. It was a hell of a lot easier to stay with the woman my family adored, the one who adored me. But the wrongness fit itself around my body like a hairshirt the day I proposed, and as the months wore on and plans finalized and deposits were paid, it grew tighter and tighter, choking me.

I should have called it off the morning of the wedding when I woke up in a cold sweat, unable to believe this was actually going to happen. Instead, I married her, and then I spent four years making her regret it.

Shara hated me by the end, and I hated myself. We weren't alone. My little brother hadn't called me anything more affectionate than *fucking asshole* in months, and this past Christmas, he and my mother went to *Shara's* house.

Only my oldest, closest friend clapped me on the shoulder with anything resembling sympathy.

"You were an asshole," Jack Davis agreed soberly, "but you learned from it."

"You think a lesson learned always justifies the means, professor?" I asked, half-sarcastic, half-serious. Jack and I met when he was just a TA hoping for an adjunct position, but now he was a tenured professor at Boston University. Forty-eight years old to my forty-two, he was the big brother I'd never had, and his opinion was one of the few that mattered to me.

Jack shrugged and tipped back his beer. "I think your family needs to move on," he said after he swallowed. "Your divorce has been final for a year now."

It had actually been final for a year and a half, which meant I'd asked Shara for the divorce almost two years ago. Which meant that it was a damn good thing Jack and I only got to catch up but twice a year so this shit still smelled relatively fresh.

"Enough about me being an asshole," I said, signaling to the bartender that I was ready for another Sam Adams. "Tell me how *you've* been an asshole lately. Make me feel better."

Jack's grin was quick and self-effacing. We both knew damn well Jack hadn't done anything worse than cross against the light. He was a straight arrow, an all-around good guy. Happily married to his high school sweetheart, a father of three kids who didn't hate each other like my brother and I did, and a popular professor.

"I bet on the Cubs the other day," he said after some reflection. "They were playing the Yankees."

I snorted, unimpressed.

Jack grinned again, then said, "Okay, how about this? I lured a friend to a bar under false pretenses."

I raised my eyebrows, sure this was going to end in some bullshit *for a surprise party* twist.

“Yeah,” Jack rubbed his chin. “I acted like I just wanted to catch up, but really, I had a favor to ask him.”

“You snake,” I said drolly. “Did he say yes?”

The bartender dropped my new Sam Adams on the bar, closer to Jack than me.

Jack slid the beer down to me. “I don’t know. I haven’t asked him yet.”

I raised my eyebrows. I could count on one hand how many times Jack had asked me for a favor. Not that I didn’t owe him at least a dozen, but he wasn’t the kind of guy to ask. Hell, he wasn’t the kind of guy to *need* a favor. When I met Jack, I was twenty-two and he was twenty-eight going on forty. He wore argyle sweater vests and bow ties and plaid jackets with patches on the elbow. I was struggling through college with financial aid, a work-study set up, and a chip on my shoulder. We should have detested each other, but you couldn’t hate a guy like Jack. He saw what you needed and got it for you before you could tamp down your pride and ask.

“Whatever you need, it’s yours,” I said, the game on TV snagging my attention. I wasn’t even that curious what it was. I was just glad I finally had a chance to repay him for those long years when I was struggling and he was always there to kick my ass or buy me a beer, whatever he deemed necessary. If it was money, I’d hand him a blank check. If Jack hadn’t been there, I doubt I’d be in the position I am now. He was the one who pegged I’d be good at marketing and helped me get my foot in the door at a firm. Now I had my own, and the money I’d been chasing so hard for so long was suddenly abundant.

Even after Shara’s cut, I had more money than I’d ever imagined I would.

“You remember my oldest, Layla?”

“Yeah,” I said distractedly. The Red Sox had two men on base and two outs. It was hard to focus on Jack’s favor.

“She’s moving back home.”

“Hey, that’s great, man.” I managed to tear my gaze away from the game. I knew Jack and Isabelle hated letting Layla go to college across the country. Hated it even more when she told them she was never coming back. I wasn’t surprised she’d changed her mind though. People don’t leave Boston for good that easily. “Is she bringing—” the name of Layla’s longtime boyfriend escaped me.

Jack was already shaking his head. “Christian, and no. The reason she’s coming back is because they broke up.” He sounded grimly cheerful about it.

“That’s too bad.”

“For him.” Jack ordered his second beer—his last of the night. He never drank more than two.

I grinned and tipped mine up. This poor bastard Christian could have been rich as Midas, smart as Einstein, and been the male equivalent of Mother Theresa, and Jack still wouldn’t have thought he was good enough for his little girl.

“Anyway, she’ll need a job.” Jack threw me a significant look. “Do you know anyone who is hiring?”

“Sure, Cross Media is,” I said easily. If this was the favor, Jack had gone too small. “I mean, I can’t just hand her a job, but I can give her an interview.”

“That’s all she needs.” Jack pulled his beer closer, a look of satisfaction on his face.

“Great.” Keeping one eye on the TV, I worked my phone out of my back pocket and fired off a quick email to the head of HR. “Have her send me her resume, then give me a day to look at our openings and figure out where I think she’d be best.”

“I appreciate it, pal.”

I dipped my chin in acknowledgment. I wasn’t worried that Jack was about to put me in a bad spot. He would never ask me to hire Layla if she wasn’t capable. And hell, it might even be fun to have one of his kids around. Our company was like a family, and Jack *was* family. It would be a good fit.

I was sure of it.

CHAPTER 3

LAYLA



My dad texted and called when I was in the air, somewhere between LAX and Logan International. I hadn't even tried to get on their complimentary Wi-Fi, so I didn't get his messages until we landed. Then I had to read his text three times before I gave up on deciphering it and listened to the voicemail he'd left.

"Good news," he announced cheerfully. "I'm leaving for the airport in an hour, so I'll absolutely be on time."

I smiled a little. My dad had a lot of great qualities, but being on time wasn't usually one of them. I'd originally asked my brother to pick me up, but when my dad heard about it, he insisted on coming himself.

"And I found you a job! Can't wait to see you, sweetheart."

I held the phone away from my ear and blinked at it, wondering if I'd heard him right. I went back to his text messages and now it made sense. He'd gotten me a job. I groaned aloud, causing a couple of my fellow passengers waiting at the baggage carousel to shoot me sideways looks.

While I waited for my large gray suitcase that looked like all the other large gray suitcases to come around, I wondered what poor acquaintance my dad had prevailed upon. Was I going to be answering phones in the history

department at BU? Giving car insurance quotes at his friend's dealership? Learning how to shampoo dogs at the Canine Carousel his second cousin just opened? It could really be anywhere. My dad had friends in all sorts of places.

And I couldn't even claim that I didn't need the job or that I had *any* savings stacked up, ready to float me through the next month. I was so broke that my best friend since childhood had thought twice before agreeing to be my roommate.

"Are you sure you shouldn't live with your parents for a few months?" she'd asked bluntly. "Just until you're on your feet?"

But there was no way I was going back to living with my parents. I loved them, but I was twenty-five years old. I needed to live on my own, even if that meant washing dogs, working up car insurance quotes, or whatever my dad had found for me. And what's more, I was going to be grateful. And I *wasn't* going to think about how hard I'd worked for my marketing degree or how many hours I'd put in at my last job.

Trying not to feel sorry for myself, I hoisted my bag off the carousel and dragged it out to meet my dad.

Outside, the thoroughfare was a mess of cars jostling and jockeying, trying to get close to the curb at the right time to pick up their passengers. My dad slid through it effortlessly and jumped out to grab my bag. He even risked the other drivers' wrath to give me a big hug before he threw it in the trunk.

"How was your flight?" he asked, slipping back into the hustle and bustle of traffic as easily as he'd slipped out of it.

"Good, easy." I eyed him, trying to figure out where he might have gotten this job from so I could prepare myself when he announced it.

My dad shot me a grin, like he knew what I was doing. "Did you get my message?"

"About the job?" I kept my grimace inward. "I did. How exactly did you pull that off?"

I fully expected him to say something along the lines of, "Oh I was chatting

with Kathy, you know, the woman who owns that coffee shop down the street, and she said she was looking for an extra hand.” Instead, he surprised me by saying, “Do you remember my friend Aiden Cross?”

I almost swallowed my gum. Did I remember Aiden Cross? He had only been my first crush. At the time I would have described it as first *love*, I was that crazy about him. The only thing that had stood between us was the fact he was seventeen years older than me, my dad’s best friend, and barely knew I was alive.

I mean, he *knew*, but he thought of me exclusively as Jack Davis’s oldest. He said ‘*hey kid*’ when he saw me, even on the day I graduated high school and thought maybe, finally, he would really see me. I’d felt so mature, so poised, driving back to the house that day after the ceremony was over. All of my family and closest family friends were there. I had turned in my graduation hat and gown and was wearing a dark purple, short-sleeved skater dress that made my blue-gray eyes pop. My skin was tan, the neckline was scooped, and I had paired it with block heeled sandals.

I thought for sure that Aiden Cross would see me and realize that I was his dream girl, the same way I’d come home after volleyball practice my sophomore year to find him at the dinner table and realized I was going to marry him.

That wasn’t what happened, though. Instead, his longtime girlfriend Shara had been there in high heels, a dress I could never afford, and an engagement ring.

The shock of it, the way the color had drained from my cheeks, the way my heart had felt like it had been skewered on that huge, two-carat, flawless diamond ring came back to me now. A ghost of the initial pain, but still tangible enough to make my breath shorten.

“I remember,” I managed to say without wheezing.

“He started his own marketing firm, Cross Media, about twelve years ago.”

I remembered that, too. When Cross Media signed a big client that my dad knew through BU, Aiden Cross had bought him a car. My dad had tried to refuse, but a new car meant I could inherit his old Buick.

“Come on, Jack, do it for the kid,” Aiden had convinced him. “Besides, this is just your cut. You just made me a fortune.”

“Aiden is giving me a job?” I asked, putting the pieces together. I would have done it sooner if I hadn’t put Aiden in a box labeled *off-limits* nearly eight years ago and tried to forget he existed.

“He’s giving you an interview, which in my book is as good as a job offer.” My dad grinned again, the deep dimples in his cheeks forming easily. He was an interesting contrast to Aiden. Easygoing, a little fusty in his uniform of tweed jackets and argyle sweater vests. He leaned into the college professor look for sure. Aiden had a permanent furrow between his brows, and he mostly wore black. Black jeans. Black boots. Black leather jackets. An occasional white t-shirt, like maybe he ran out of black ones that day. It worked with his black hair and his shockingly blue eyes.

“An interview isn’t the same as a job offer,” I disagreed, trying to shove the image of Aiden in his black leather jacket out of my mind.

“Is it for you!”

I kept my sigh inward. It was hard to have your dad still believe you were the best thing since sliced bread when LA had taught you the truth. You were the best thing since that last underpaid intern, whatshername, now be a doll and get me some coffee. “I don’t know, Dad. This doesn’t seem right.”

My dad’s brow furrowed; an expression that was as unnatural for him as it was natural for Aiden. “What doesn’t seem right about it?”

“He’s like your best friend. He’s going to feel like he has to give me the job. Other people in the office might find out I’m a nepo-hire and resent me. It’ll get around in the industry that I got a job I’m not qualified for and my name will be mud forever.” I listed the reasons on my fingers but stopped short of adding the main reason—*I can’t possibly work for someone that gorgeous if I can’t have them.*

My dad shook his head and the car bobbed between the lane lines in time with the motion. “Aiden is my friend, but he’s not a charity. He won’t hire you if he doesn’t think you can do it.”

I wanted to argue, but I had a feeling he was right. It would be embarrassing

to get a job because my dad pulled some strings. It would be devastating to *not* get a job even though my dad had pulled some strings. There was no way I was getting out of this interview, and that meant I had to ace it.

A queasy mixture of excitement and trepidation swirled in my stomach as we got closer and closer to the apartment I'd be sharing with my best friend. I was going to see Aiden Cross again, and this time, I *had* to impress him. I had to make him see me.

Which meant I'd need to do better than a skater girl dress and a high school diploma.

CHAPTER 4

AIDEN



I was running late because even though Shara and I were divorced, she still managed to fuck up my morning. She was asking for an increase in alimony based on inflation.

“I told you not to give her alimony,” my lawyer and friend, Darren Wilkes, said. “I told you it wasn’t necessary. I told you—”

“I know.” Irritated, I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. “I should have listened.”

“—you didn’t even have kids,” Darren barreled on, undeterred by my interruption. He had told me, and he was going to make sure he told me so on all counts.

“We didn’t have kids because I didn’t want kids. Hence, I felt guilty enough to pay her alimony.” That wasn’t the only thing I felt guilty about, but it was the easiest to explain. Shara had wanted kids, and I hadn’t, and now she was thirty-eight and looking into her options. Alimony had felt like the least I could do for wasting ten years of her life. Now, though, I wished I had listened to Darren.

“The judge will laugh it off his desk,” Darren predicted. “She never left the workforce. She has a Masters degree. This could backfire on her.”

By the time I got off the phone and got in my car to drive to work, I was running thirty minutes late. I didn't even remember that today was Layla Davis's interview with the brand development sector of Cross Media until I got up to my office and saw the reminder I'd set for myself. I planned to go down for the last five minutes of it just to say hi. I hadn't seen her since her high school graduation.

"You won't recognize her," Jack had predicted.

"I'd recognize a Davis anywhere," I countered. Jack's tribe was unmistakable. Dark reddish-brown hair, big blue eyes, pale with pointed chins.

Despite the reminder, I got caught up in work and didn't remember to go down. We'd just been hired by, what was for us, an unusual client. Blake Morten was a minor YouTube personality who was trying to build his brand. We offered brand development services, but we were generally hired by companies or people starting companies, not people trying to brand themselves. My head of Brand thought we were up for it, though. After she interviewed Layla, she and I were going into a strategy meeting with what we'd designed as Blake's team.

I was mildly regretful that I'd missed catching up with Layla, but only mildly, and only for about twenty seconds before I forgot about the interview altogether. I was ninety percent focused on work, ten percent berating myself over Shara, and entirely unprepared for the tentative knock at my open door.

I looked up and was surprised to see a young woman framed in the doorway. She looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out why. I didn't think she worked at Cross Media since I made a point of knowing every name, and besides, my employees typically took advantage of the relaxed dress code. Instead of jeans, she was wearing tailored pants, high heels, and a silky t-shirt that was so white I instinctively pulled my coffee cup closer.

"Hi Aiden," she said, her lips curving into a tentative smile. "They told me to go up."

I stared at her, nonplussed. *Who* had told her to go up? And how did she know me so well that she called me Aiden instead of Mr. Cross when I still couldn't figure out where we'd met?

The silence stretched on. The woman tucked a lock of her burgundy hair behind her ear and reached up to toy with the charm on her necklace nervously. Her big blue eyes slid sideways, like she was hoping there was someone else in the room she could talk to instead.

And then the pieces fell into place. The hair, the eyes, the familiarity.

“Layla!” I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. “I didn’t—” I broke off with a laugh that made her tilt her head curiously.

“Your dad told me I wouldn’t recognize you,” I explained. “And I told him I’d always recognize a Davis. But he was right. You’re all grown up.”

I had come around my desk with the intention of giving her a hug, but something stopped me. This wasn’t little Layla Davis who had been one of the pack of kids that swirled around Jack like a three-ringed circus. And it wasn’t the disinterested, withdrawn teenager I remembered her becoming. It was a woman. A *beautiful* woman. Her hair had darkened so that it almost looked brown, but I could still pick out the dark red tint. Her body had—

No. I shut that examination down hard. I wasn’t going to consider how Layla’s body had changed from the thin, gawky teenager who swamped herself in sweats and hoodies, even in the dead of summer. There was a big, flashing *DANGER* sign over the entire subject of Layla’s body, and thinking about how drop dead gorgeous she’d become was a bad idea, too.

“God, kid, it’s good to see you.” I still wasn’t sure whether I should hug her or not, but a crisp high five seemed like a strange choice, and I wasn’t a handshake guy. I compromised with a quick hug—almost too quick to catch the scent of her shampoo and notice how soft her skin was.

“Not a kid anymore,” Layla said, still toying with the charm on her necklace. An emerald in a gold Celtic knot. Her siblings each had a similar one, and Jack wore the symbol on a ring. Proud Irish.

“No,” I agreed. “A college graduate.”

“And your newest junior marketing manager,” she said, her smile widening. Then a cautious look crossed her face. “I just want to make sure... I didn’t get this job because of my dad, did I?”

I shook my head, glad I could tell her in complete honesty that it had been hers to win or lose. “No, I didn’t even tell Maureen that I knew you.”

Layla looked visibly relieved, and I was fascinated by how transparent her emotions were. I was used to people in the marketing world who felt like they had to look cool, calm, and collected at all times. And I’d grown up in a place where people hid their emotions behind disinterest and hostility. Layla was an anomaly in both.

“I’m glad I earned it,” she said, more to herself than me. “I’d rather not get the job than be handed it.”

She might not look like just one of the Davis pack anymore, but that was a Davis thing to say. Her dad was one of the hardest workers I knew, after me. The youngest BU professor when he was hired, he’d done a lot to prove himself. It looked like his daughter was following in his footsteps, which was great for Cross Media.

Complicated for me, now that I knew she wasn’t the gangly kid with braces I’d half expected to show up today, but rather one of the more intriguingly beautiful women I’d seen in a while.

“Listen,” I scrubbed my hands together like I could dust off the realization, “I wish I had time to go for coffee or show you around, but I’m actually on my way to a meeting with Maureen.”

“The brand development meeting for Blake Morten?” Layla’s eyes sparked with interest. “Maureen said I might be working on that account.”

“That’s the one.” I wasn’t sure how I felt about Layla working on that account. Blake Morten’s following was largely women, and it wasn’t hard to see why. He was the only vet I’d ever seen that looked like a damn Viking prince. I told myself it was paternal interest that made me wary. Layla was Jack’s daughter and therefore, in a way, her welfare was my responsibility. “Do you follow him?”

“I didn’t before, but I will now.” Layla laughed and a dimple appeared in her cheek. “Part of the job, right?”

My smile felt thin between my lips. “If you’re on that account.”

I walked Layla to the elevator and pondered whether I could convince Maureen to put her on something else. Surely there was a more experienced person she could pull from another team and then shore up the vacancy with Layla. I think we had some nice small businesses that could use Layla's talents. Maybe the shampoo company startup or the bakery.

"When do you start?" I asked, wondering how much time I had to figure this out.

"Monday," Layla laughed at the look of surprise on my face. "It's not like I have to give another employer notice. What I *do* have is rent."

"You're not living with your parents?"

Again, that almost translucent honesty. Her nose wrinkled and her mouth pulled down at the corners. "Definitely not." Then, as if she was worried she'd offended me, she added, "I mean my dad is great and all, but I'm twenty-five."

"Sure, makes sense." I looked away and tried not to notice that she was twenty-five. I was relieved when the elevator *dinged*, announcing its arrival. I didn't know how much longer I could pretend not to notice what was so obvious.

Layla got on the elevator. I raised my hand in a half wave and started to turn away, but before I could, our eyes locked.

Just for the few moments it took for the doors to slide shut, I felt like we were really looking at each other—like we were seeing each other for the first time. Not as Jack's daughter and his best friend, but just as a man and a woman.

My heart ratcheted up. My mouth went dry.

And then thankfully, the moment was over.

I turned away, thunderstruck. What the hell had just happened?

And how was I going to keep it from happening again?

CHAPTER 5

LAYLA



My new apartment was only a fifteen-minute drive from Cross Media. I took the long route though, and made it take thirty. I shouldn't have wasted the gas, but I couldn't face going straight home. My best friend worked from home, so she'd be there waiting for a full report. Then my brother was supposed to come over after his afternoon class, and the three of us were going out tonight to celebrate.

I was looking forward to it, but right now, I just needed some time alone. I needed to process what had just happened. I needed to convince myself that it hadn't.

I hadn't just felt the same lurch of helpless lust at the sight of Aiden Cross.

We hadn't stared at each other longingly as the elevator doors slid closed.

I hadn't just taken a job where I was going to be in close proximity with him five days a week.

I played the radio loud, trying to drown out the truth, but I heard it in every song. Unrequited love. Hopeless love. Bad choices. I should have switched it off the country station and played some Top Pop 20, but it felt masochistically good to wallow in my teenage crush and heartbreak. Although it was a distinctly less pleasant feeling to realize it wasn't confined

to my teen years anymore. Aiden Cross looked just as good today as he had then—better, even. His early forties had put some silver at his temples and weathered his handsome face in a way that made my heart beat even faster than it had at eighteen. He still wore black, although today his leather jacket had been nowhere to be seen and his shirt had been gray. His eyes were still piercing blue, sharply keen, like he was seeing your secrets even when his voice was friendly and affable.

I was still crazy about him. There was no way around it. And I'm sure he was still married to the beautiful blonde whose name I'd blocked from my memory. I couldn't block out the sight of that huge, sparkling diamond on her ring finger though. The one that had made my heart drop into the pit of my stomach and drink too much on graduation night.

Realizing that I could drive all the way up and down the east coast and still be in the same absurd position, I turned to go toward my new home. It was a newly renovated apartment building near Boston College, steps from the Green line. It wasn't as sleek and modern as my place in LA had been, but I liked the hardwood floors, crown molding, and the bricked-up fireplace in the living room. It made it feel cozy. Best of all, I got to live with Liv, my best friend since middle school. She was an accountant for a company based on the west coast, so her hours started and ended early. The other benefit was that my brother was nearby. He was in his senior year at Boston College, and he was already planning to use our apartment as his crash pad between classes so he didn't have to drive all the way home and then back.

Doing my best to push Aiden Cross out of my mind, I headed up to our fourth-floor apartment. There was an elevator, but I always took the stairs because I didn't trust it. Besides, the exercise would explain my rapid heartbeat and flushed cheeks if Liv happened to ask.

When I got to our hall, I could tell Liv had been working hard because there was a pile of empty moving boxes stacked up outside our door. I walked in to see her organizing our spice rack, an AirPods in her ear.

“How'd it go?” she asked, pulling it out and twisting to read my face.

I gave Liv two thumbs up, and she grinned. “Knew you had it in you, Davis.”

“Two years of underpaid labor just paid off.” I kicked off my heels and went

to the refrigerator. She'd already set up our filtered water pitcher and put it on the shelf alongside a few salad dressings. Overall, though, the contents were pretty sad. We needed to go grocery shopping more than we needed to go out to a bar tonight. I poured myself a glass of water and leaned against the counter.

"Well?" Liv waved her hand at me. "Are you going to tell me everything, or not?"

Not.

"There's not much to tell," I lied. "I interviewed with Maureen O'Donnell, head of Brand Development. She offered me the job. I met the boss. I came home."

Liv looked down at me skeptically. "You met 'the boss'? You mean, your biggest crush ever?"

I almost choked on my water. "Oh my God, that was so long ago, I'm totally over it. Besides, he is my boss now."

"Mmmhmm," she said, looking at me as if she didn't believe a word I said.

"I just don't want to make a big deal about it." I put my glass in the dishwasher and left the kitchen. I was heading for my room, but my apartment was small enough that it wasn't like I was walking away. Liv could still hear me clearly even after I dropped my purse on the bed and started changing out of my interview outfit. "Besides, I don't want people thinking I got the job because he's my dad's best friend, you know?" I said, raising my voice slightly.

"I get it," Liv called back. I heard the clunk of spice bottles again and knew she was back to work. That was good. Nothing distracted Liv more than a good project. Grateful for the reprieve, I pulled on a pair of black shorts and a dark red tank top. It wasn't hot here compared to how it could get in LA, but it was warm for Boston. I pulled my hair up into a high ponytail and threw myself on my bed. After three years of working my butt off at internships, it felt strange and decadent to have nothing to do in the middle of the day. I had a moment's regret that this was my last lazy weekday, but I was too grateful to have a job to really be sad.

As I laid in bed, listening to the traffic outside, the voices floating up to our window as people walked by, I had a strange feeling. Something like hope. No, more than that. *Anticipation*. Here I was, twenty-five years old, finally getting a real start in life. I was paying my own way instead of relying on a relationship that I knew was doomed. I was finally on a rung of the corporate ladder instead of standing below, waving my arms frantically, trying to catch the bottom of it. I was a real adult, which meant this unbearable ache in my chest that looked like Aiden Cross was a *real* thing.

That was both exhilarating and terrifying. I rolled onto my side and stared at my pillow shams until they blurred into indistinct purple blobs. I didn't have a lot of options here. I clearly couldn't make myself fall out of obsession with my dad's best friend. The best thing I could do was avoid it and hope it went into remission the way it had during my nearly eight years on the west coast. But there was no way I could give up the job with Cross Media, so avoiding him wasn't an option. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Luckily, my job in the PR industry had prepared me for impossible choices. Should we advise the radio personality to admit what he'd done and face the consequences, or deny deny deny and hope nothing ever came out to prove otherwise. Generally, we went for a middle of the road approach. Admit half. Use vague language. Apologize. I'd take the middle of the road approach with Aiden, too. I'd take the job, but I'd do everything in my power to avoid him.

How hard could it be?

CHAPTER 6

AIDEN



The meeting with the brand development team got pushed, kicked to lunch, and then after lunch, and finally, we turned it into a dinner meeting. I didn't like doing shit like that—not because I had a family to rush home to, but I knew other people did.

“It's fine,” Maureen assured me. “You know what our team likes more than their families? Family-style Italian and wine on the company dime.”

I snorted a laugh and made the reservation. We liked a place called *Giussepes* down the street that had big round, family-style tables with a Lazy Susan in the middle. We went there often enough that when we walked in, they already had the large bowls of pesto cavatappi and fettuccine alfredo and vodka campanelle. There were also baskets of breadsticks, hot and shining with butter. It was simple Italian, but the pasta was made fresh in house every morning and I'd never tasted better.

Our group of six fell around the table and the wine began to flow as the Lazy Susan spun and the sound of forks clinking against porcelain filled the air. We had a strict rule about not discussing business in the first thirty minutes. People needed to eat, to decompress, to drink, and *then* we'd get to Blake Morten.

Maureen was clearly itching to get to it though, because she set a thirty-

minute timer on her phone and checked it more than once throughout the meal. I eyed her, wondering what was up. Maureen was an ace, but she wasn't usually a workaholic. She liked to eat, drink, and decompress as much as the rest of us. When her alarm went off, her arm shot out and stopped the spinning contraption on the table in its tracks.

"Hey," Joe complained, reaching in vain for the bottle of red that had been on its way to him.

"Sorry, Joe. It's time to talk BM." She held firm to the edge of the rotating disk even as Joe tried harder to get to the wine.

"Is that the best nickname?" Gloria wondered, ignoring Joe's attempts to get her to hand him the bottle that was right in front of her.

"It's the perfect nickname," Maureen said flatly.

"Really? Because it makes me think of bowel—"

"Like I said." Maureen cut her off. "Perfect."

Andrew, who was sitting to Gloria's left, lazily plucked the bottle of wine from the center and topped off his glass. Then, with a malevolent grin, he put it back further away from Joe.

"Assholes," Joe complained, giving up and reaching for the bottle of white.

Amused, I topped off my own glass and looked expectantly at Maureen. I was the CEO, but as head of Brand Development, this was her show.

"I don't like him," she said unnecessarily. Normally her mouth was a harsh slash of stiletto red that stood up to anything, but now her lower lip was curled down. "And I don't know why the cats do."

"Because cats are dumb," someone across the table opined.

I ignored the playful bickering that broke out between the cat people and the dog people and reoriented my impression of Blake Morten, based on this new information. Blake's big thing was that he was a 6 '4, model-handsome vet who had an affinity for tabby cats, and they seemed to have an affinity for him, too. I didn't know much about the guy, but his online presence gave off an 'aww shucks, I'm just a small town guy, I don't know what all this fuss is

about' vibe. I knew better than to take it at face value, but I'd had high hopes he wasn't an asshole. We worked with enough of those.

"He's an asshole," Maureen announced, quickly relieving me of that hope.

"I think he's just blunt," Gloria said.

"Because you want to bone him," Joe said, clearly still nursing a grudge over the wine.

Gloria made a face at him but didn't argue the point. "I mean, who doesn't."

"I don't." Maureen and the other dog people were quick to snap.

"Okay, okay," I held up my hands and the table fell quiet. "BM—"

I paused for the snicker.

"—is our client, whether we like him or not, and he wants to build a brand around treating animals well. Even if he is an asshole."

"He is," Maureen assured me.

"Our goal remains the same. Make him the biggest cat-loving asshole in the world. So, what's our plan?" I sat back and crossed my arms, throwing it back to Maureen.

Maureen outlined it quickly in a concerningly droll tone of voice. I knew she was a consummate professional who suffered assholes as much as she had to, but I also knew that two of her kids were teenagers. Her tolerance was already being tested. She was suggesting a team of three, with herself as point person, but I shook my head. "I think we need a fourth. This is a big client and it sounds like he's going to be a difficult one."

Maureen cut her eyes at me. "I don't need a fourth."

"I'll be the fourth," Gloria said.

"No, you won't," Maureen said. "You don't even like cats."

"I like *vets*."

I ignored Gloria and caught Maureen's eye so she knew I was serious. "I

want you to have a fourth.” It wasn’t often that I overrode Maureen, but I felt like this situation called for it. She wasn’t going to sacrifice her pride by admitting she wanted more coverage on this guy so she didn’t have to interact as often, even if she needed it.

Maureen stared at me for a second, then rolled her eyes to the ceiling, aggravated. “Fine. I’ll take the new girl. She’s from LA—she’s probably used to dealing with guys just like him.”

“The new girl,” I echoed. My heartbeat lost its rhythm and I coughed, trying to jolt it back into step.

“Yeah, Layla Davis. Didn’t you meet her?”

“I did, I did.” I nodded and rubbed my chin between my thumb and my forefinger. I wasn’t sure if I was trying to mimic the memory coming back to me or whether I was trying to come across as some thoughtful grandfatherly figure. The truth was, her name disoriented me. Like missing a step or striding purposefully into a room only to realize you had no idea what had brought you there. “Layla Davis,” I repeated. Maureen was right; she would be perfect. So why did every muscle in my body go rigid at the idea of her on that account?

“Layla Davis,” someone across the table said encouragingly, like they were trying to jog my memory. “She starts Monday.”

“Right.” I knew the team was watching me, wondering what the hell was going on. I hoped there was no way they could tell that I was frantically trying to figure out a reason why Layla Davis couldn’t be the fourth person on the Blake Morten team. “Isn’t she too new?” I asked, grasping at straws.

“She just did three years of internships in LA,” Maureen said with a shrug. “Joe’s only been here two years.”

“Two and a half,” Joe said. “Coming up on three.”

“Yeah, in six months,” Gloria said. “That’s what the half means, Joe.”

I wished those two would bone, as they put it, and stop making the rest of us witnesses to their bitter foreplay. I tried to focus my thoughts. Surely there was a legitimate reason why Layla couldn’t be the fourth. But if there was...

I couldn't find it.

"Is that a problem?" Maureen asked, studying me curiously. I knew what she was thinking. I was usually so hands off, but now I'd not only insisted she add a fourth person to the team, I was also questioning her choice of who to add.

"No problem," I said finally, and pasted a bland smile on my face. The words felt like rocks in my mouth but spitting them out was my only option. I couldn't come up with a decent reason, and if I kept blundering around like this, Maureen was going to have more questions.

Questions I didn't want to answer, even to myself.

CHAPTER 7

LAYLA



My first weekend back in Boston was exactly what I wanted it to be. Bran spent most of the weekend with us. On Friday night, we went out to the bar that was a short walk from our apartment and had a little too much fun. Bran crashed on the sofa that night, then went home in the morning with his head between his hands. After he left, Liv and I took the same short walk we had to the bar, but now the side street was closed down for the weekly farmer’s market.

“What are you doing?” Liv asked when I came back with a mini cheesecake and macarons.

I looked down at the reusable bag she’d reminded me to bring. “Shopping?”

She clucked her tongue and rustled her own bag at me, which was overflowing with baskets of strawberries and broccoli and long bunches of carrots. “Layla, you go to a farmers’ market for the fresh fruits and vegetables. You know, things with micronutrients that you *need* for the week.”

“I *need* this cheesecake and macarons.” But as we began ambling back the way we came, I stopped for peaches and tomatoes.

“Better,” Liv said.

I rolled my eyes and bumped her with my hip. “God, when did you become the farmers’ market police?”

“When I started buying my own groceries and realized I was poor.”

I could relate. Back in LA, I’d brought home barely enough to cover rent and utilities, but Christian’s salary had always more than compensated. Now I was really on my own for the first time, and I was realizing that macarons were prohibitively expensive. Still, I looked down at the perfect pastel pastries with only a hint of regret because, expensive or not, they were delicious. “Maybe I can skip micronutrients and just eat macarons,” I suggested.

“And get scurvy?”

“I’ll sneak some of your orange juice once in a while.”

We stopped for coffee—even Liv agreed that we had to get coffee to celebrate our first Saturday morning living together—and spent the rest of the day emptying the last of our moving boxes. Then Bran came back over for our girls’ night with the rest of our high school friends. He fit right in, just like he always had. The age difference had become nearly negligible, and the fact he was six foot two and good looking more than made up for the fact he was still in college. I saw more than one of my friends eyeing him speculatively.

Including Liv.

Sunday morning was lazy—we didn’t want to spend money or move—and I didn’t bother changing out of my pajamas until it was time to go to family dinner. I invited Liv to come with me to the weekly Davis gathering, but she wanted to get ahead on a project she had due that week.

“Where’s Liv?” Bran asked the second I walked through the door and no one else followed.

“With her lover.”

Behind Bran, our youngest sister, Cecilia, curled her lip. “Gross.”

“Yeah, gross,” Bran echoed, following me through the house. “Seriously, where is she?”

I looked at him over my shoulder as I moved toward the kitchen where I could hear my parents bickering and something boiling over on the stove. “Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Because—” for a second, Bran looked vulnerable, despite his height and his good looks. He scrubbed his hand through his reddish-brown hair, and a flush pinched his broad cheekbones. He looked up at me between his unfairly long lashes. “She’s not really, is she?”

“Gross,” Cecilia announced again.

“It’s not gross, it’s *goulash*,” my mom yelled from the kitchen.

Cecilia went in ahead of us, probably with the intention of getting us in trouble for talking about *lovers* around the baby of the family. The baby of the family didn’t seem to realize that she was seventeen years old and going into her senior year of high school.

Bran and I exchanged expressions of mutual disgust. We agreed on a lot these days, and Cecilia was one of them. We kept waiting for her to grow up and be fun, but she clung stubbornly to the dynamic that had defined us for years. She was the youngest and therefore the most put upon and most likely to be left out, and she was perpetually bitter about it even as she perpetuated it.

“No, she doesn’t have a boyfriend,” I relented. “She’s working.”

Bran rubbed his palms together, all swagger and confidence again. “I like me a breadwinner.”

“Gross,” I said in both mockery and agreement with Cecilia.

I should have known that the dinner conversation would turn to Aiden and the new job. My dad poured four glasses of wine.

“Kids drink at *sixteen* in Europe,” Cecilia complained.

My dad ignored her and raised his glass. “To Layla’s new job!”

Cecilia scowled, and my stomach dropped. We were *definitely* going to talk about Aiden. Four wine glasses and a water glass clinked, and I swallowed half the goblet in one go.

“Honey,” my mom said, alarmed.

“Chug, chug,” Bran chimed in.

“Sorry, just—I think I’m nervous about starting tomorrow.” I pulled an apologetic face at my dad. “Is it okay if we don’t—”

“Don’t be nervous!” His words bounded over mine like a golden retriever puppy. My dad was an emotional person, and he didn’t hold back on showing the love and pride he was feeling right now. “You are going to be *great*. I told Aiden you didn’t need any favors, that if he got you an interview, you’d get yourself the job, and you did!”

“I sure did,” I agreed weakly. I wished my mom would stop watching me so closely so I could finish the rest of my wine.

“So tell us everything,” my dad demanded.

“Yeah, everything,” Bran agreed. I shot him a glare. He didn’t know why I was so uncomfortable, but he was happy to pile on. Payback for making him think Liv had a boyfriend.

“Yeah, *everything*,” Cecilia echoed sadistically. Just like Bran, she didn’t need to know why. She just needed to know how to make it worse.

“There’s not much to tell.” I poked at my goulash with a spoon and hoped that would be the end of it.

Of course it wasn’t.

“Did you get to talk to Aiden?” my dad pressed. “He said he was going to try to catch the end of your interview.”

“I did, yeah. I went up to his office afterward and said hi and thank you.” *And undressed him with my eyes as the elevator doors closed. I think maybe he was doing the same? Maybe I just wish he was.*

There was a beat while my family waited for me to elaborate. I took a bite of goulash. “Great job, Mom,” I said after I swallowed.

“And?” my dad waved his spoon at me.

“And Dad. Great job, both of you.” I took another bite.

Bran looked torn between laughter and sympathy.

“No, *and* what else? What are you going to be working on? Are you reporting directly to Aiden or someone else? Is the—” my dad rubbed his thumb against his other fingers and raised his eyebrows. “—good?”

“I think so, yeah.” It was above what a lot of starting salaries were, and I’d been pleasantly surprised. It wouldn’t be hard to pay my bills and even have a *little* left over for nights out and farmers’ market macarons. I took another bite of goulash and then laid my spoon down. I wasn’t getting out of this. “I’m going to be on the brand development team, and I’m hoping that I get to work with Blake Morten, their newest client.”

“The cat guy?” Bran scoffed. “He looks like a—”

“Bran,” our mom warned, nodding toward Cecilia, who was looking very pious and injured.

“—loser,” Bran redirected with a roll of his eyes. “Don’t work with him, Layla.”

“Work with whoever you can,” my dad disagreed. “Work hard, and Aiden will take care of you. I’m sure of it.”

I stared down at my goulash and tried not to think too hard about Aiden taking care of me. When I looked up, Bran was staring at me. There was a quirk at the corner of his mouth that told me he knew what I was thinking.

I kicked him under the table. He tried to kick me back and hit the table leg instead.

Cecilia stared between us, trying to figure out what Bran had. And then when she couldn’t, she said in a loud, clear voice, “Mom, they’re kicking each other under the table.”

My parents exchanged suffering looks. I sent Bran a death threat with my eyes.

He just grinned and rubbed his thumb over his other fingers at me. “Be sure to say hi to Uncle Aiden for me,” he said in a syrupy voice our parents should have picked up on but didn’t.

“Uncle Aiden,” my mom said, temporarily distracted from silently agreeing with my dad that they’d done something terribly wrong in raising us. “That’s cute. I like that.”

“To Uncle Aiden,” my dad said, and raised his wine glass again.

I tried to repeat the toast along with the others, but the words stuck in my throat. There was no way I could even pretend.

When I thought about Aiden, there was nothing familial about it.

CHAPTER 8

AIDEN



I'd always been good at math, so on Monday morning, I sat at my desk and calculated exactly how little I could interact with Layla without Jack thinking I was being an asshole. I decided it was pretty damn little, especially if I stepped back from this Blake Morten thing and let Maureen run the show, like I usually did anyway. Sometimes I went with the team to the new employee lunch, but I decided that this time I wouldn't. For one thing, I didn't want it coming up that Layla and I already knew each other. That wasn't a good look for her first day, even if she had earned the job completely on her own merit. For another thing, I didn't want to spend an entire lunch hour sitting across from her, or God forbid, beside her. It was better for my sanity if I just checked in with her at the end of the day, made sure everything was going well, and then avoided her completely.

It was a good plan, but it didn't account for the layout of the office. Cross Media had the top three floors of the building. The very top floor was two stories tall with a floor of cubicles below and then a ring of offices above with a walkway that overlooked the cubicles. As luck would have it, every time I walked out of my office and turned left to talk to the closest set of stairs down, I had a birds' eye view of Layla.

The first time I left my office on Monday morning to meet Maureen for our usual Monday coffee meeting, I stopped short. Just outside of my office on

the floor below, Layla was going through the onboarding process in her new cubicle. She was wearing all black, and it made her pale skin glow and brought out the fire in her dark auburn hair. I could only see her profile, but even in that, her beauty was undeniable. My stomach tightened. Any hopes I'd harbored that she wasn't actually as stunning as I'd remembered were immediately dashed. I quickened my pace so that she wouldn't catch me watching her out of the corner of her eye, but I took note of every detail.

Her desk was positioned so that her back was to me and I could see her monitor. I could also see the pictures she'd set up beside her computer. One picture was of the Davis clan, which meant Jack's affable grin was fixed on me as I tried not to let my gaze linger on the slim lines of his daughter's back. Another picture was of her with a group of girls, their arms around each other. They were all wearing fedoras for some reason, and there was a stage behind them.

"Aiden," Maureen barked from the bottom of the stairs. "Are you coming?"

In my periphery, I saw Laya's head snap up. I pretended like I hadn't seen her and jogged down the steps to where Maureen was holding both of our to-go mugs from our favorite coffee shop down the street. I took mine from her and was about to say, "Let's go" when all of a sudden she looked past me and said, "Hey Layla, why don't you come with us?"

Catching my frozen stare, Maureen frowned. "What? This is a good chance to catch her up on Blake since you're not coming to her welcome lunch."

Behind me, I heard Layla pushing back her chair and gathering up her things. When she appeared at my side, we exchanged strained smiles. I was glad to see both of us were on the same page regarding hiding our connection. It was still strange, though. I wondered how the hell we were going to keep it up in front of Maureen.

I worried about the wrong thing. We were almost out of the building when Joe and Gloria snagged her.

"But it's coffee time," Maureen complained, holding up her empty mug like it was her ticket out of the meeting they were trying to pull her into.

"No, it's crisis management time," Gloria said. She took Maureen's mug and

held it out. “Will someone get Maureen coffee?”

“I will.” Layla took it, looking glad to have something to hold onto. “How do you take it?”

“Aiden knows,” Maureen said grumpily as she followed Joe and Gloria into a conference room.

In her absence, tension immediately filled the vacuum. I didn’t know if Layla felt it, too, or if it was entirely one sided. It was probably one-sided, I decided. After all, she just saw me as her dad’s stuffy old friend.

Since the tension was mine, I had to be the one to dispel it.

“So how do you like being back home?” I asked jovially as we turned out of the building and began the short walk to the coffee shop Maureen and I frequented.

“It’s great,” Layla said, the travel mug grasped tightly between her hands. Her nails were painted dark red and her fingers were bare. I had a sudden flash of her in high school, a ring on every finger, sometimes two. Her nails had been bitten off then or tipped with long, stiletto shaped acrylics that Jack always said would put someone’s eye out one day.

“What?” Layla asked self-consciously.

I realized I was looking at her sideways, silently clocking all the other ways she’d changed. I hurriedly snapped my gaze forward. “Nothing, I was just thinking about how much you’ve changed.” I wasn’t good at dishonesty.

“Have I changed much?” Layla asked.

I shot another look at her to see if she was joking, but her expression was serious. Her wide blue eyes met mine, and she seemed to be waiting for an answer.

“I—yeah, I mean, it’s been nearly eight years. Of course you have.” I reached up and tugged at the collar of my shirt. An old habit. A tell. My friends from the old neighborhood always knew when I had a particularly bad hand in a card game because I’d tug at my collar and crack my knuckles. I resisted doing the latter now.

“You look the same,” Layla observed. Even though I was staring straight ahead again, I could feel her gaze was still on me.

“Yeah, well, time goes slower when you’re old like me. You don’t see much difference between seventy-five and eight-five-year-olds, do you?” Yeah, that was a good tactic, I congratulated myself. Remind her—and yourself—how much older you are than her.

“No, but *you’re* not seventy-five. You’re, what, forty?”

“Forty-two.”

“That’s not old.”

I looked over at Layla again. Was I imagining that soft, persuasive note in her voice? It was impossible to say. Her expression was entirely unreadable. “Almost as old as your father,” I said finally, feeling like I was putting a nail into a coffin. I didn’t really want to nail the lid down, but it had to be done.

She made a face at me. “You are not nearly as old as my father,” she disagreed. “My father was born an old man. Have you ever seen a picture of him as a baby?”

I couldn’t help laughing at her description because she wasn’t wrong. Even as a twenty-eight-year-old, Jack had seemed middle-aged. An old soul, Shara called him. I was pretty sure it was just the fact he already had kids that was putting that gray in his hair. “He used to be young and cool,” I lied. “We both were, a long time ago.”

“I don’t believe you,” Layla smiled.

Fuck, there it was again. It wasn’t what she had said, but rather *how* she had said it. Something resonated in her voice that I couldn’t put my finger on. But I wanted to. Thank God we were at the coffee shop now. I yanked open the door a little too enthusiastically and gestured for her to go in ahead of me.

I caught the faintest hint of tangerine and linen as she moved past me, and I had to stop myself from leaning forward as I got in line behind her to catch another whiff. I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was her shampoo. Thinking about her shampoo led to me thinking about her in the shower, which almost led somewhere worse, but I managed to redirect. Instead, I thought about

what Jack would do to me if he knew I had pictured his daughter in the shower, even for a second.

“How does she take her coffee?” Layla asked, studying the board.

“Blonde roast. Four creams, eight sugars.”

Layla looked over at me to see if I was kidding. I wasn't. “That's practically a frappuccino.”

“I know.”

The line moved up. I took the travel mug from Layla. “Here, I'll do it.”

She handed it over gratefully. “Thanks. I don't want that to be their first impression of me.”

“I understand.”

We were both speaking in grave, serious voices, but there was an undercurrent of laughter to the conversation that felt almost as dangerous as thinking about her in the shower. I couldn't think about her naked, and I couldn't have fun with her either.

Both were slippery slopes.

CHAPTER 9

LAYLA



Somewhere between leaving the office for the coffee shop and returning, caffeine in hand, I stopped being nervous around Aiden. It was a strange, exhilarating feeling. When I was a kid, I'd been intimidated by him. When I was a teenager, I was in love with him. Up until thirty minutes ago, I'd felt the same combination of excitement and nerves that I'd felt the day of my high school graduation—but with an edge of trepidation that the butterflies in my stomach were about to get stomped on.

Now all that was gone.

When I looked at him now, I didn't see my dad's best friend anymore.

I didn't see the unattainable older man.

I didn't see my boss.

I just saw Aiden, a handsome guy that I wished would ask me out.

I wasn't stupid—I knew that he *was* all of those things, but for the first time, I felt free of everything they stood for. Almost without realizing it, I slipped into treating him like he was a person instead of a walking No Trespassing sign.

And from this new vantage point, I started to suspect that Aiden wasn't

thinking of me just as his best friend's kid or his newest employee anymore. It was hard to define exactly, but there was something vital and vibrant between us. It sparked in our conversation on the way back, but it was there even in the quiet moments, too. A humming vibration that made it impossible to feel awkward with him.

When we went our separate ways at the office—me to my cubicle and him to his office on the half-level up, my heart was beating pleasantly fast. I felt dreamy and a little dazed as I sat back down to finish my onboarding. Somewhere, far below the cloud I was floating on, the alarm bells and warning sirens were still going off, but they were distant. Unimportant. The sound of Aiden's laughter floating out of his office or the pattern of his footsteps easily drowned it out. And when I felt his eyes on me, I couldn't hear anything but the blood rushing in my ears as my heart picked up speed again.

I could always tell when he was looking at me. It was a tell-tale prickle up the back of my spine. A warm, giddy feeling that I didn't understand until I looked up in time to catch him looking away. It was intoxicating. I wanted to drink in the attention he was trying to hide, sneak off and call Liv, doodle his name in my notebook like I was back in high school again.

But I wasn't in high school anymore and I had a job to do.

With monumental effort, I blocked out the giddy voice in my head that was chanting *Aiden Cross sees you* and finished the onboarding process. Then I went to my first meeting with the team and met Joe, Gloria, and the rest. I'd been worried about being the new girl—in my old job, that designation had lingered for over a year and was basically code for *coffee bitch*. Even though getting Maureen coffee had been my first act at my new job, I could tell right away that it was a real team. For one thing, Maureen was actually grateful.

“I know it's a lot,” she said, referring to her diabetes-inducing order. “Sugar is what keeps me running though. It's a vehicle for the caffeine. If I could just order a cup of sugar with two caffienes, I would.”

I liked her right away. Her energy was frenetic and tense and fun all at the same time. She set the tone of the meeting, freeing everyone from the constraint of typical meeting protocol. Everyone seemed comfortable putting

their ideas on the table and yelling at each other and reaching over to pat each other condescendingly on the head. In some ways, they reminded me of my family. They criticized and talked over each other, but affection padded the jabs.

They took me out to lunch at one of their favorite places and it felt like a lighthearted test of sorts. No one said anything, but they watched me out of the corner of their eyes. I made sure to eat every bite and tell them it was delicious. Which it was.

“I think she’ll be a good fit,” Gloria pronounced when my plate was clean.

I left at the end of the day feeling more comfortable than I’d ever felt at my old company in LA. Even after two years, my manager slipped and called me Lila at least once a week. Eventually, she stopped apologizing, and I stopped correcting her.

“We’re going to happy hour on Thursday,” Joe told me as we walked out together. “The whole company goes about once a month.”

“The whole company?” I asked, my interest piqued.

“From the CEO to security. First drink is on the company.”

I tried to hide how impressed I was. I was used to hierarchies in LA. There, the happy hour invitees had been divvied up by rank. Only upper management this time, or maybe this team is invited, but not those two newest members. Or sometimes it was about who was willing to be on camera when they were going to a place that was filming a reality show. Never ever had the whole company been invited, and I doubted they even knew the names of the tangential workers like security and janitorial.

Of course, Aiden was different. He’d never been impressed by rank or privilege. From my dad’s stories, he actively disdained it. My dad had first noticed him when another professor pointed him out and said, “That kid is going nowhere fast, and he’s doing it with an attitude.”

“And he was right,” Aiden chimed in when my dad told the story.

“You were always going somewhere,” my dad disagreed. “You just needed help finding which direction to start in.”

“Yeah, because I was headed straight for jail.”

He’d been joking, but there had been a grim note in his voice and a faraway look in his eye that lent his laughter a false note. My dad hadn’t laughed at all, just shook his head. “No. You were always going somewhere great.”

I felt like I was heading somewhere pretty great, too, as I headed home. The day was beautiful—even better than LA, in my opinion—and I was filled with a sense of being in the right place at the right time. I’d never felt that way in California. I knew I must have felt something like this when Christian and I first started dating, but that was so long ago, and it had gotten so muddled in the end that I could hardly remember.

Thinking about Christian and the way it ended still tugged at my heart, pulling down at the edges of it, but even that memory couldn’t dim my happiness. The glow stayed with me all the way home, and when Liv got a look at me, she said, “Wow.”

I grinned self-consciously and tugged a heavy lock of hair over my face, trying to hide it. “What?” I asked through the dark strands.

“I just have never seen anyone look so happy after a first day at work. Did they promote you already or something?”

I let my hair drop. “No, my coworkers are just really nice and accepting of my ideas.”

Liv studied me and then shook her head. “No, that’s not it. Nice coworkers are great and all, but they don’t make people glow.”

“I’m not glowing.” I headed back to my room to change. My feet were used to wearing high heels all day—my old job would have accepted nothing less—but it was still nice to change. I padded back into the living room in my shorts, t-shirt, and slippers just as Bran let himself in the front door.

“Hi Bran,” Liv said, not looking up from her computer. “Your sister had a weirdly good first day at work, but she won’t tell me why.”

Bran dropped down onto the loveseat beside her, his leg smashed right up against hers, his weight folding the cushion so that her shoulder tipped into his. I waited for Liv to scoot away, but to my surprise, she didn’t seem to

mind.

Interesting.

I sat down on the long couch that had plenty of room and studied them.

“What?” Bran asked.

I considered pointing out how cozy they looked but decided against it. Instead, I pulled my legs up onto the couch and stretched out, enjoying the space. I was staring at the ceiling, contemplating a snack, when I realized that my best friend and my brother were communicating silently. I pulled my eyes down in time to see Liv incline her head toward me and Bran roll his eyes.

I narrowed mine. “What?”

Liv pretended like she was absorbed in her work, but Bran didn’t have anything to hide behind. And he wouldn’t have bothered even if he had. “Liv wants me to find out why you looked so happy when you got back from work. She’s really nosy.”

Liv sunk her elbow into his side.

“Ow,” Bran said, but he still didn’t move away.

“Are you two flirting?” I asked, going on offense. “You’re practically sitting on her lap when I have all this room over here.”

“I’d rather sit on Putin’s lap than anywhere near you,” Bran said, comfortably slipping back into our childhood dynamic. “And if you aren’t nice to me, I’ll tell Liv *exactly* why you look so happy.”

Liv’s eyebrows shot up and she stopped pretending to be working.

“Why?” I called his bluff.

“Yeah, why?” Liv echoed when Bran only grinned.

“Do you want to tell her or do you want me to?”

“Nothing to tell.” I closed my eyes, smugly certain that Bran was about to have to admit to Liv that he had nothing. But again, I was surprised.

In a loud stage whisper that I felt certain could be heard all throughout the building, Bran leaned closer to Liv and said, “She’s in love with her boss.”

CHAPTER 10

AIDEN



If I could have fired Layla, I would have. Not because she didn't fit right in with the Brand Development team, not because Maureen had even hinted that her job performance was anything less than stellar. No, it was solely because I couldn't think when she was around.

I started getting into the office early to get work done before she came in at nine. Somehow, I always knew precisely when she arrived, even with my door shut. The energy on the floor changed, became charged. I didn't need to hear the tap of her high heels on the steps or hear her smoky laugh to know that the particles of the room had become electrified. When it happened, I gritted my teeth and put my Bose headphones on, using the pounding music of my disaffected teen years to drown out her presence.

I couldn't avoid her though. We weren't a huge company, and I had a hand in everything. We found ourselves going into the same conference rooms or going for the pot of coffee at the same time all throughout the week.

"Where's your travel mug?" Layla asked teasingly on Wednesday when I showed up with the Okay-est Boss Ever mug that Maureen had gotten me a few years ago. I watched amusement gild her smile as she read it.

"I don't go out for coffee every day," I said shortly, trying not to be affected by her beauty.

Layla raised one eyebrow, silently questioning my terseness without seeming particularly bothered by it. It seemed she didn't have to pretend to be unaffected by me. She treated me with the exact same comfortable affection she showed Joe and Stephan and the others. I'd say it was flirtatious, but it was how she spoke to the women, too.

"I'm sure you're very busy," she said, and poured the coffee in my mug before pouring her own.

It was a neat trick how she managed to sound completely serious and I still felt playfully patronized. I ground my teeth, wondering how she'd done it. Had she done *anything*, or was I reading too much into everything she did?

"Thanks," I said gruffly and turned away to head back to my office where I could shut my door and clamp my headphones over my ears and let the *Dropkick Murphy's* replace the relentless thoughts of my best friend's daughter.

But Layla's casually friendly voice stopped me. "I'm looking forward to the game on Friday." Her head was bent down, carefully adding milk to the top of her already full mug. She flashed me a smile. "I remember going a few times on your tickets when you'd give them to my dad."

I didn't have to look around to know that no one was in earshot. Layla wouldn't have said anything otherwise. We were both careful not to mention our longstanding connection at work.

"You'll know the seats then. They haven't changed."

"Right behind the dugout?"

I nodded and her smile widened. "No wonder they love you."

The sight of her pink lips jarred me. I couldn't explain it, but it was like *deja vu* or an out of body experience. Over in a snap, but a moment too long to go unnoticed.

Layla tilted her head. "Are you all right, Aiden?"

"Fine," I said, my voice tight as a rubber band about to snap. "But I thought we had an understanding."

Layla straightened at my tone, careful not to spill her coffee. “Did we?”

Though it would have been smarter to take a step back, I took one forward to make sure I wasn’t overheard. “Yes. I thought we both understood that any reference to our mutual acquaintance was off-limits in the office.”

Layla looked half amused, half bewildered. She took a step forward, too, bringing her far too close. “We do have that understanding, but I thought that since we’re alone...”

“We’re not alone; we’re in an office.” Again, my voice was far more brusque than I intended, but I was overcompensating, trying to cover the way my body reacted to her.

Layla studied me. She didn’t look offended, and she didn’t look particularly chastised either. Part of me was glad she wasn’t easily cowed—I liked people with a fighting spirit—but it would have been easier if she were. If there weren’t challenging sparks leaping out of her blue eyes. “Sorry, boss,” she said in a faintly ironic voice. “I’ll be more discreet going forward.”

I felt like an asshole, but worse, I felt like grabbing her by the arms and yanking her toward me. Hell, I’d take the scalding coffee on my chest if I could feel my lips on hers. Her body against mine.

“Good,” I snapped and made a hasty retreat before I could do anything we would both regret.

It was only back at my desk that I realized hiding in my office could only work for so long. As of two pm on Friday, the office was shutting down early and we were all taking a break from business to drink beer, eat hot dogs, and watch the Red Sox trounce the Mariners.

Almost every office romance had started at one of these games, or at one of our happy hours. Inhibitions lowered, any semblance of professionalism was left behind at the office, and the seeds that were planted in meetings and break rooms came to fruition.

It was going to be harder than ever to keep my distance.

On Thursday, I worked later than usual. I liked it when the office quieted around me, leaving just me and the work and the pounding music in my ears. I could feel the emptiness, the space, the freedom, no chance of Maureen popping in to tell me about the latest insane thing that Blake Morten had said. No one tapping at the door, asking if I wanted to grab a beer. And most importantly, no Layla. I'd only seen her in passing today, and I considered that a success.

At seven, I finally pushed my chair back from my desk, pulled off my headphones, and stretched my arms over my head, letting the tension of the day snap and crackle out of my spine. The company was growing—something I knew I should be grateful for, and I was—but the number of pain-in-the-ass clients we worked with was growing, too. Gone were the days when we worked with primarily plucky entrepreneurs or family run businesses. Our reputation had grown to the point that clients sought us out instead of the reverse, and I was beginning to think we needed to start being more discriminant about who we worked with.

Blake Morten, for example, might not have been our wisest choice. He may have been an up and comer, but according to Maureen, he was drinking his own Kool Aid. There were a few cardinal sins in the business, and believing your own hype was one of them. It made you smug, it made you lazy, it made you entitled. Apparently, Blake was all three.

“So cut him loose,” I suggested earlier when she came in. “We don’t need his business.”

Maureen had looked at me like I’d suggested we light a couple million dollars on fire and roast marshmallows. “I’m bitching here, Aiden. Not committing career suicide.”

Maureen trended dramatic. Maybe we’d lose Blake’s connections, but if he was that bad, did we want them?

“I want a fat bonus this year, so yes,” Maureen had answered.

I shook my head at the memory but grinned in spite of myself. This was why Maureen was indispensable. She kept me focused on the most important things. I'd made enough money, for me. I owned my apartment in the city and ten acres of land a couple hours outside of it. My plan was to work for as long as it was still stimulating, and then quit as soon as my heart stopped beating fast with excitement at the next challenge. Then I'd sell the apartment and build on the land. Retire to the life that never seemed within my reach as a kid growing up in a bad part of town, where there was more trash on the ground than grass. Graffiti blooming everywhere instead of flowers. Some of my friends had fantasized about the sleek penthouses on Millionaire's Row, but I just wanted space.

It was ironic that I was thinking about space as I pulled my office door shut behind me and felt the telltale prickle go up the back of my spine. I knew Layla was on the floor even before I heard the sound of her footsteps coming up the hall from the elevator bank. Before she rounded the corner into the office space, her oversized purse slung over her shoulder, sunglasses pushed up on top of her head, breath coming fast. I hadn't heard the elevator ding because she'd taken the stairs.

There were a few seconds where she didn't see me standing there, and for once, my observation was one-sided. As always, when I looked at her straight on, her beauty smacked me in the face. Her lips were lush and full, painted a dark velvety red right now that she didn't wear at work. She'd changed out of what she'd worn to work into a V-neck shirt that clung to her breasts and tucked into the waistband of her dark denim shorts. I hadn't heard the usual click of her heels because she had changed into white sneakers, and her hair was down from the clip she'd worn it in.

"Oh," she said, coming to a startled stop as she caught sight of me standing just outside my office door. Her hand smacked her chest. "You scared me!"

"What are you doing here?" I asked curtly, not bothering to apologize like I would have done if she had been anyone else. "It's after hours."

That was bullshit because we didn't have hard and fast hours. Sometimes we all went to dinner and then came back to the office to finish a project. Layla arched an eyebrow at me like she knew it, like she'd heard about our work hard, play hard credo. "I'm not coming back to work," she said, and finished

the walk to her cubicle. She picked up her phone from where it had been lying beside her keyboard and waved it at me. “I just forgot this.”

I felt like an asshole, which was probably because I was acting like an asshole, but I still didn’t apologize. Layla dropped the phone in her pocket and put a hand on her waist, staring up at me with those same challenging sparks in her eyes from the other day. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

I shrugged.

“Am I crazy or are you mad at me?”

Every muscle in my body tensed. Of course she’d just come out and ask me. She was a Davis. Her dad would have done the exact same thing, but he wouldn’t have added the alternative of am I crazy or. This was a good time to temper things. To apologize and tell her I had gone too far in trying to not show her favoritism. It would have even been a version of the truth, though she would think the favoritism was due to her dad rather than this overwhelming and unwanted attraction I felt for her. But I didn’t do that. Instead, I doubled down.

“I’m not mad at you, Layla.” With difficulty, I tried to cloak the truth with a patronizing tone. “I’m your boss while we’re in the office, not a family friend.”

“No, of course, but—” she frowned and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “You’re everyone’s boss here, right? But you’re friendly with them. And with me you’re...” she shrugged a shoulder and tilted her head, “terse.”

I stared down at her, unable to dispute it. She walked to the bottom stair and looked up at me. “Is it something I did?”

She knew it wasn’t. I couldn’t shake the feeling she knew everything, and I wasn’t doing myself any favors by continuing this charade. But I wouldn’t be doing myself any favors by admitting the truth either. Jack abhorred violence, but he’d castrate me if I touched his daughter. Resolved, I walked down the stairs, careful to keep as much space between us as I could when I passed her at the bottom. “If you feel like I’m treating you unfairly—”

“No, not unfairly.” Layla shook her head and I caught the scent of her shampoo. Almond and vanilla. “Just differently, and I wish you’d tell me

why.”

Her blue gaze was direct, a hint of the challenge still remained. God, I was tempted to take her up on it. Again, the urge to grab her and pull her against me swept over me, so visceral I could feel her soft breasts against my chest, the denim pockets of her jean shorts rough against my hands as I gripped her —

“I have told you,” I said, my voice less a snap and more a strangulation. “I need you to stop thinking of me as your dad’s friend and start thinking of me as your boss or this isn’t going to work out.” I brushed past her and headed for the stairwell. I had to get away from her now. But I couldn’t help looking back at her one last time before I turned the corner. She had turned to watch me go, but she was still standing by the bottom of the stairs, her arms crossed. I had a feeling my outburst had had the opposite effect.

Now she knew there was something going on.

“Just so you know,” she said when our gazes clashed, “You were always more than just my dad’s best friend.”

CHAPTER 11

LAYLA



I met Liv and Bran at a bar close to Cross Media twenty minutes after my baffling confrontation with Aiden. After he left, the heavy stairwell door thunking behind him, I'd sat down at my desk, overwhelmed. He had been so agitated. It had vibrated in his body, wound his voice up so tight it was nearly unrecognizable. And he hadn't been able to tell me why. His answers were bullshit, and I didn't need my minor in Psych to tell me that. Every woman knew that when a man looked at her like that, he either hated her or wanted her and couldn't have her.

And Aiden had no reason to hate me.

Since both Liv and Bran knew my feelings for Aiden, I decided to put this situation before them. I wouldn't put much stock in my little brother's advice normally, but he had intuited what I thought I'd so carefully guarded. And Liv was sure to tell me to do the most sensible thing possible, which was exactly what I needed to hear right now.

At the bar, over our first round of beers, I took a deep breath.

"Oh shit," Bran said, displaying that uncanny, and unwelcome, intuition again. "She's going to talk about..." he leaned in over the gleaming mahogany tabletop, putting his hand down in a circle of condensation, "...her boss."

Dramatic effect achieved, he pulled back and wiped his hand off on a bar napkin.

I was grateful for the dim lighting because I had a feeling my cheeks were flushed for reasons that had nothing to do with the brisk walk over here.

“Is that true?” Liv asked. “Is there an Aiden update?”

I winced and looked around, but no one from the office was in sight. “It’s not an update exactly,” I muttered, leaning in like Bran had done. “It’s more a conundrum.”

“To bang or not to bang, that is the question.”

“Shut up Bran.”

“Do *not* bang,” Liv said immediately, as I knew she would. “That can only end in tears. And unemployment.”

I happened to agree, but the problem was, tears weren’t a strong enough deterrent. I looked at Bran.

He surprised me by making a face, jerking his shoulder, and saying, “Do what you want, I guess.”

“Um, no, because what she wants is your *dad’s best friend*.”

“Okay?” Bran spread his hands out, palm up. “So what? Everyone is someone’s best friend—you can’t make them all off limits.”

“So he’s like seventeen years older than me,” I said because someone had to.

“Who cares about age once you’re both consenting adults?”

I wanted to scrub my eyes and make sure it was really Bran sitting across the table from me, but I knew he’d call me out on the theatrics. Still, I couldn’t help scrutinizing him out of the corner of my eye as I took a drink of my beer. Who *was* this guy sitting across from me, being so mature rather than making gagging noises?

Then, I saw who *he* was sneaking glances at while he pretended to be so casually tipping back his beer, and it all made sense.

Everyone is someone's best friend—you can't make them all off limits.

Who cares about age once you're both consenting adults.

He wasn't making a case for me and Aiden—he was making a case for himself and *Liv*.

I nearly choked on my beer. Liv looked at me with concern. Bran looked at me with a laugh in his eyes. He knew I'd figured it out, and he knew there wasn't a thing I could say about it. If he had a thing for my best friend, that was nothing compared to who *I* had feelings for.

“So I think we're all agreed,” he said blandly. “You should go for it.”

Every day was pretty casual at Cross Media, but early release game days were *really* casual. When I opened the refrigerator to put my salad inside, I saw it had been stocked with beer.

“We start pre-gaming at noon,” Joe told me.

“Joe starts pre-gaming at noon,” Gloria corrected. “The rest of us wait for the bus.”

“I'm ahead of my time,” Joe quipped.

Later, I saw that Joe wasn't the only one. At least half the floor grabbed a beer with their lunch, and productivity wound down the closer the clock ticked to the time the bus would pull up outside the building to drive us to the stadium.

I wasn't one of the drinkers, though. In fact, I stayed at my desk through lunch. I was catching up on work. The Brand Development team was having our first big meeting with Blake Morten next week, and I wanted to make sure I was well versed in his presentation and platform.

Gloria pulled up a chair to watch some of his YouTube videos with me, chomping noisily through carrot sticks while they played.

“Oh don’t worry,” she said when I shot the bag of carrots a sideways glance. “He says a variation on the same five things in every video. You don’t need to catch every word.”

I tried not to snicker, but I’d watched enough of them to know this was true. “Why is this guy so popular?”

“Because he’s—” *chomp* “—a gorgeous, cat-loving specimen of a man hunk.”

Joe sidled over, beer in hand. “I thought I heard someone talking about me.”

This time I did not snicker, but Gloria did. I winced for both of them. I sensed that, despite her prickly attitude, Gloria liked Joe, but if she didn’t start giving him some hope, he’d give up.

“We’re watching Blake Morten’s YouTube channel,” I told him, angling the screen so he could see better.

Joe made a face. “No, thank you. Maureen made us do a movie night where we watched them all in a row. How many times has he said that his best friends have four legs?”

“At least a dozen,” I admitted.

“What about ‘we don’t choose them, they choose us’?”

“More than a dozen.”

“I swear to God—” Joe set down his beer and held his hands up, palms out, “—the first time he came in, he said with absolutely no hint of irony, ‘sometimes I wonder who saved who,’ while showing us pictures of his first cat.”

“Isn’t that a bumper sticker?” I thought for sure I’d seen it slapped in a few back windows with silhouettes of cats and dogs bookending the words.

“Yes, it is, so the fact he injected it into casual conversation like it just came to him—” Joe shook his head, too disgusted to finish his sentence.

“It was gross,” Gloria agreed. “But like, his arms.”

“What about them?” I studied them in the video. They were thick with muscle, but they were almost *too* big, like maybe he’d have trouble finding shirts that fit comfortably in the sleeves.

“Don’t give him a reason not to wear a shirt,” Joe said caustically when I said so. “I’m pretty sure he’s just looking for one.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Gloria said.

The three of us hung out at my cubicle, watching videos, Joe and Gloria trading barbs, until nearly two. Then I felt a telltale prickle as the small hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I knew Aiden was behind me.

Sure enough, within a second, I heard him clear his throat. “Buses are here, team. Remember, have fun, but keep your shit together. You’re still representing Cross Media.”

As everyone streamed toward the exit, I took my time gathering up my stuff. I figured Aiden would go last, and I was proved right. We were in the last wave of people going down the elevator, which I hoped meant we’d end up near each other on the bus. I’d decided to take my brother’s advice and go for it, and sitting next to Aiden on the bus was phase one of my plan.

The elevator was crowded, but even still, I felt the electric tension arching between us. He was as aware of my proximity in the small space as I was his. We exited together, our shoulders brushing. He held himself so stiffly, his jaw set, and he made sure to put some space between us the second he could.

On the bus, I was disappointed when Maureen had saved him a seat in the front row. She had both of their travel mugs, but this time, I didn’t think there was coffee in them. I sat four rows back with Andrew, a cute guy with an open smile and a habit of touching whoever he was talking to. He was twisted around talking to the people behind us, leaving me free to study Aiden and Maureen.

I had initially wondered if maybe there was something between them, but the more I studied them, the more sure I was that there was nothing. They had a brother and sister vibe. Besides, I was pretty sure Maureen was married with kids. Not that that would stop everyone, but Aiden’s moral compass was clearly—and annoyingly—rigidly fixed.

The problem wasn’t that he wasn’t interested in me, I’d reasoned with Bran and Liv, it was that he wouldn’t do anything about it because of his friendship with my dad, even though there really was no reason not to. I was

a consenting adult, as Bran had pointed out.

“Respect it,” Liv said. “Go out with someone else.”

Bran had snapped his fingers. “Yes, go out with someone else—and make sure he knows it.”

Liv had punched him on the arm. He’d said, “Hey, watch it.” I’d left to get us another round because they were clearly about to flirt, and I didn’t want to see it.

Now though, I considered Bran’s advice. Maybe he was onto something. I hadn’t played games since high school, but jealousy was a potent motivator. Maybe it was even potent enough to overcome Aiden’s misgivings.

With that in mind, I turned in my seat, making sure to bump my leg against Andrew’s, and joined in his conversation.

I’d let Aiden watch *me* talk to someone else for a change.

CHAPTER 12

AIDEN



Andrew Gold was a great analyst. He was instrumental to the Market analysis team. But maybe I could fire him anyway.

I toyed with the idea as, two rows ahead, he leaned in close to Layla's ear to say something that made her shout with laughter. As always, the smoky timbre of it went straight to my groin. I'd never thought a laugh could be so sexy, but it was the way she threw her head back, the motion of that beautiful russet brown hair, the way her blue eyes closed as her cherry red lips curved. I wanted to make her laugh, then kiss her while her mouth was still wide open. Slip my tongue in and...

"You're not eating your hot dog," Maureen said, offended. "I put the damn relish on just like you like it."

Maureen had stood in line for our hot dogs while I went halfway around the stadium in search of the beer we liked. So now, even though the hot dogs were on the company dime, she was pissed I wasn't eating it. Sometimes, having Maureen as one of my closest friends was akin to having a fussy older sister.

I took a big bite to satisfy her, then continued boring holes in the back of Gold's head. He was a friendly guy, but was it my imagination, or was he being a little too friendly with Layla? His hand was splayed out on the arm

rest between them, and two of his fingers were on her bare leg. Too damn much of her legs were bare for my liking. She was wearing white shorts that showed a mile of tan skin. Her Red Sox shirt wasn't as tissue paper thin as her t-shirt from yesterday, but it clung to her generous curves and pulled the glints of red from her hair.

The day was postcard perfect. Low eighties, no humidity, the sky was a clear blue dome over the bright green grass of Fenway Park. Baseball was invented for days like this. Three hours with your best pals, beer, and hot dogs. I tried to get in the zone, but my gaze was drawn inexorably back to Layla and Andrew. My chest grew tighter and tighter as the innings wore on and he transferred his full hand to her leg, one finger at a time.

I was in a foul mood by the end of the fourth inning. I told Maureen I needed another drink, but what I really needed was to get away from Layla and Gold. I took a trek around the stadium, passing our favorite beer stand the first time because one lap wasn't enough time to finish berating myself. What the hell was wrong with me? I was being a complete fucking idiot. I had no right to this burning knot of tension in my chest because Layla wasn't anything to me but an employee and my best friend's daughter.

And then suddenly, she was right in front of me. She was standing at the top of the stairs, two beers balanced in her left hand, raising a third beer to her lips with her right hand, waiting for the play to be over so she could go back to her seat. I hadn't even realized the circuit had brought me back to our section.

Her eyes flicked to the side as if feeling the weight of my gaze in her peripheral vision. Her cherry red lips curved into a smile and she raised the hand that only held one beer in greeting. "Hi, what are you doing?"

"Getting a beer." I didn't mean to clip my response so short, but I couldn't help it. It was like she was fucking haunting me. "I see you found some." It was meant to be lighthearted, but it came out with a bite.

Layla raised her eyebrows and flicked her tongue over her top lip as if she thought there was a hint of beer foam there. Or she was just trying to torture me. If it was the latter, she was succeeding in those little white shorts with the ghost of Gold's fingerprints on her upper thigh. "They're not all for me. One

is for Andrew and one is for Gloria.”

“I figured.” It was like there was something curdling in my throat, making it impossible to speak without an acidic afterbite.

Layla looked at me without speaking, then suddenly, she turned away and began walking. I stared after her, confounded. She wasn’t going toward our section, and she wasn’t going toward the bathroom or the concessions, either. She glanced over her shoulder once at me, *aren’t you coming?* I couldn’t help myself. I followed.

She led me to a quiet place against the back wall of the stadium where we were obscured from the flow of traffic. Then she put down the beers and put her hands on her hips. “*What is your problem?*” she demanded, putting herself toe to toe with me.

My problem just then was that I could see right down her shirt from this angle. Tanned, generous curves in a satin white lining. My mouth went dry and I stared hard into her blue eyes, refusing to let my gaze dip lower again.

“I don’t have a problem,” I lied. I might have gotten away with it if I could have left it like that, but I couldn’t. My mouth disengaged from the rational part of my brain and added, “Except I’m sick of watching Andrew Gold paw you. This is a company event, Layla. I expect professionalism.”

Her eyes widened and she barked out a laugh. “Don’t give me that bullshit. We came on a party bus, Aiden. You and Maureen were drinking beer out of a coffee cup on it, remember?”

“Yeah but we weren’t feeling each other up in the back row,” I snapped. “There’s a difference between a good time and being irresponsible.”

She shook her head. “No, there’s a difference in how you expect *me* to act versus everyone else. Joe and Gloria are practically procreating next to me, but all you see is Andrew’s hand on my leg. Which doesn’t bother *me* at all.”

My vision narrowed. That was it. I would find a way to fire Gold. “Well it fucking bothers *me*,” I said without thinking.

Layla’s face was the only thing I could see in my narrowed field of vision. I watched it morph from angry to incredulous to something I couldn’t quite put

a name to. Curious, maybe. “Why?” she snapped, her hands still fisted on her hips.

“Why what?”

“What does it bother you when Andrew is touching me?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she cut me off. “And don’t give some bullshit line about protecting me. I’m a grown ass woman who can handle myself.”

She was right, and I thanked God for it now, because I couldn’t hold myself back any longer. That indefinable glint in her eye looked too much like an invitation. I leaned forward so our foreheads were nearly touching and cupped her chin. “Trust me, I know you’re grown,” I admitted harshly.

Layla’s eyes widened and she stepped closer, her body brushing mine now. “Then why?” she asked again. The knowledge was burning in her eyes, electrifying the space between us, but she was determined to make me say it.

I couldn’t put it into words, but I tilted her chin up until her mouth was right beneath mine. Her breath was coming fast now. Mine had stopped altogether. I needed her to push me back into my place, to demand sharply to know what I thought I was doing. Either of those things would have stopped me in my tracks. But she didn’t, and all the reasons I should stop myself felt puny and insubstantial. Yeah, Jack was going to kill me, but he had every right to just based on the thoughts I was having about Layla. And if I was going to hell anyway, I might as well make the trip worthwhile.

Giving in, I closed the scant inches between us and covered her mouth with mine.

CHAPTER 13

LAYLA



Aiden's mouth seared mine, and I only had a moment to think *finally!* before my mind went blank. Only a moment to feel triumphant excitement before burning heat took its place. I'd deliberately avoided touching him up until the moment his control finally broke, but now I wrapped myself around him. I'd imagined doing so a hundred times, but my imagination hadn't even brought me close to how good it felt to feel his hard chest against my breasts, the long, lean lines of his body bowing over me, the stubble on his chin scraping tantalizingly over the soft skin of my cheeks.

I couldn't decide where to put my hands—his broad chest, the muscular shoulders underneath his Red Sox t-shirt, or around the back of his neck where I could feel the ends of his hair. His hands were banded around my waist, his long fingers wrapped around my back, his thumbs on the waistband of my shorts.

I don't know how long we stood there, our bodies locked together, our mouths moving furiously over each other, completely unaware of the world around us. Then a loud roar broke through the haze, and I remembered where we were. Who we were with.

Aiden's mind must have been moving faster than mine, because just as I was thinking, *oh, this probably isn't the best place to do this*, he was jerking

away. His hands were up, fingers splayed and he looked wary, as if he'd just touched a burning pan and was afraid it might come back for more. His pupils were dilated, and his chest was moving up and down quickly like he'd just run a long distance.

"Shit," he said quietly, not quite looking at me.

"That was—" I wasn't sure what I was going to say. *Amazing. Unexpected.* It didn't matter though, he didn't let me finish.

"—a mistake."

Pride stiffened my spine even though a moment ago, I'd been boneless. "Why was it a mistake, exactly?"

Aiden shook his head, his mouth pressed together in a tight, flat line. "It was my mistake."

The crowd had been yelling so loudly that it formed a sort of protective sound screen around us. But as I said, "Excuse me? I'm pretty sure we were equal participants in what just happened." The crowd quieted and my words echoed around us.

Aiden winced and looked around, making sure that no one from the office had made their way over this far. I looked too. In this, at least, we agreed. I didn't want my new colleagues at Cross Media to know what had just happened between the boss and the most junior employee.

I wanted Aiden, not notoriety.

Once we were sure that no one we knew was around, Aiden took another step back and shoved his hands in his back pockets. "It was my mistake because I'm too old for you," he explained. He wasn't trying to be infuriating or patronizing, but somehow he managed to be both.

My blood boiled. "I'm not a child, Aiden. Stop treating me like one."

He gritted his teeth, trying to keep a casual smile on his face in case anyone did happen to stumble across us. "You were a child when I met you, Layla. The child of my best friend."

"And I *grew up.*" I crossed my arms, well aware of what it did for my

cleavage. I was determined to make it as hard as possible for Aiden to dismiss me. “That’s what time does, Aiden.”

“Time doesn’t change what your dad’s friendship means to me.”

That was harder for me to argue. I knew my dad had been one of the few people in Aiden’s life who believed in him, who helped him find his path, who saw through the attitude and bluster of his young twenties self and recognized his potential. And I couldn’t pretend that my dad wouldn’t want to kill Aiden for touching me because he would.

But I just couldn’t bring myself to care. It was the most reckless I’d ever felt. I’d always been careful with my family’s feelings. I wasn’t a good girl in high school exactly, but I was better than some. I knew how much they loved me, and I never wanted to disappoint them. It was a terrible thing, to want something so badly you were willing to break the hearts of the people who loved you most, but that’s where I was.

And I needed Aiden to be there, too. But I wasn’t going to beg.

“Fine,” I said coolly, and shoved my hands in my own back pockets in a deliberate mirroring of him.

“Fine?” Aiden repeated, his expression still wary.

I shrugged, trying so hard to look casual I figured I’d lapped it and showed my desperation. “I can’t make you kiss me again if you don’t want to.”

The muscle in his jaw twitched and I tried not to smirk. He wanted to. He wasn’t going to admit it with words, but his body language wasn’t as discreet.

“But,” I added, in case he thought I was going to make this easy on him. “If you aren’t going to touch me, you don’t get to have an opinion on who does, got it?”

Aiden’s eyes darkened. “I can’t agree to that.”

I curled my fingers into fists in my pockets. “You have to. You don’t get to have it both ways.”

Again, the crowd roared. While it was too loud to bother with speech, we stared at each other. The words we couldn’t speak flowed between us,

unhindered by what was and wasn't acceptable to say.

When the noise finally died down again, Aiden said in a low voice I'd never heard before. "Layla, I can't touch you, but I'll be damned if I let Gold or any other asshole in the Cross Media team have what I can't."

A delicious, dark thrill went up my spine and all through my body. I refused to melt though. Instead, I shook my hair back and raised my chin. "That decision isn't yours to make." And with that, I turned on my heel and walked away.

The rest of the game, I could *feel* the weight of his gaze, boring into the back of my head. I didn't encourage Andrew—I didn't want to be an asshole—but he was a tactile guy with everyone. And every time his shoulder brushed mine or he tapped on my leg to make a point, I felt the tension in Aiden's gaze ratchet up.

I wasn't surprised to see a scowl on his face when he boarded the bus and saw me sitting next to Andrew. He took his place next to Maureen in the front, and I wondered if now he could feel *my* gaze as I drank in the sight of his rigidly set shoulders and tense neck. I saw Maureen shoot him a look and lean in to say something, but no one else seemed to notice. Everyone else was happily drunk and making plans to continue the party.

"Ned's," Andrew announced. He pointed at Joe, "Ned's?" Then Gloria. "Ned's?"

One by one, everyone nodded their agreement. "Ned's?" Andrew asked, so close that instead of pointing, he tweaked the bill of my ballcap.

"Ned's," I agreed.

"Hey, Boss." Andrew raised his voice so that it reached Aiden and Maureen in the front row. They both turned around. "Ned's?" he asked them both.

"No," Aiden said shortly, and turned back around.

"Ned's," Maureen repeated with a nod, and she turned back too. Again, I saw her say something to Aiden that he responded to with a curt shake of his head.

“What’s wrong with the boss?” Andrew asked, lowering his voice this time so that only Joe, Gloria, and I could hear the question. “Is he a closeted Marlins’ fan?”

Joe and Gloria shrugged. I did my best to imitate their bemused expressions. Inside though, I wasn’t confused. I was disappointed. If Aiden wasn’t coming, I wasn’t sure I wanted to go anymore. It had been a fun day, but it had been a long week. I wanted to head home, get into my most comfortable sweats, and make Liv listen to my play-by-play of every second of the interaction with Aiden.

And then I wanted to get into bed and think about how I was going to get him to kiss me again.

CHAPTER 14

AIDEN



On Saturday mornings, I typically picked up doughnuts and coffee and drove over to my old neighborhood to spend some quality time with my little brother. He wasn't related to me by blood. I'd hooked up with this mentor program a few years ago when I was profiled in a few local papers as a local boy made good.

They'd paired me up with Carl O'Donoghue, a local boy determined to make bad. He made sure I knew that the doughnuts were the only reason he waited for me on the front steps of his run down rowhouse every Saturday morning. He called me big bro like he was spitting it between his teeth. Maureen gave me shit about bringing doughnuts instead of something with actual nutritional value, but Carl had a stomach curdling habit that involved chewing tobacco for breakfast, so I figured doughnuts were a step up.

This morning, he was sitting on the bottom step, looking rough and hard and about as tough as a couple of matchsticks. An ulcerous splinter. He glared at me when I pulled up and stayed right where he was. I recognized a bad morning when I saw it. I guess he'd gotten in a fight with his mom, who was far closer to Layla's age than mine, or he'd broken up with his girlfriend who kept trying to scare him with the idea she might be pregnant.

I hoped it was the latter.

Carl scowled when I got out of the car and dropped the Dunkin Donuts bag at his feet before dropping onto the step beside him.

“Where’s my coffee?” he asked ungratefully.

“Where’s my *thank you*?”

He sneered, a feeble lift of his lip that showed his mom had had about as much money for an orthodontist as mine had had at his age. I’d gotten veneers at twenty-six rather than try to deal with the jumbled mess of teeth. The thing was, I hadn’t had a state-appointed big brother to tell me about the free orthodontic services a kid like me could access. Carl did, but he was too proud to do it.

I handed him his coffee. A vanilla latte that would put Maureen’s sugar excess to shame.

Carl drank it down and smashed the donut holes in his mouth one after another. I didn’t bother to tell him to slow down anymore. I understood that he couldn’t. Maybe he would, one day, when he got used to food always being available. Maybe he’d have to live alone first, long enough that his body lost that fight or famine reflex it had developed from living with too many cousins with too little in the pantry.

“You want to go grab a real breakfast?” I asked when he was done. I always asked this, and not because Maureen had given me shit. It was because I’d honest-to-God love to buy the kid something with protein and micronutrients.

“Nah,” Carl said, like he always did.

“You want to talk about it?”

Again, that lifted lip. “Nah,” he drawled.

I leaned back, putting my elbows on the half-rotted step above us. Sometimes, Carl really irritated the shit out of me. Sometimes I thought about telling the outreach initiative that I was done reaching out, but then I always remembered Jack.

Fucking Jack, with his endless patience. The way he slid past my prickly defenses for no other reason than he thought, *this kid can’t be all that bad*.

“How’s school?”

“Shitty.”

“Your mom?”

“A—” he swallowed the word *bitch* and substituted it with a sarcastic, “—real nice lady. You want to be my stepdad?”

“Hell no. I’d retroactively drown you at birth.”

Carl thought that was funny. I often wondered what the hell had happened in his life that he’d shit on you for bringing him doughnuts but crack up over death threats. Probably the same thing that happened to a lot of us in this neighborhood. Parents who hustled so hard for survival that neglect felt like love. Hell, maybe it was, in its own way. My mom didn’t have time to make my lunch or tuck me in at night, but I had food and a bed.

Christ, it put things in perspective. I couldn’t have a day at work that was so bad that I still wasn’t a hundred times better off than I was at Carl’s age. And selfishly, I appreciated that more than ever this morning. Sure I was in an untenable, no-win situation with the twenty-five-year-old daughter of my best friend, but I’d take my problems over Carl’s any day.

“Come on,” I said, determined to repay him for this gift of perspective somehow. “I’m buying you breakfast.”

“Man, keep your fucking money. I can’t stomach food this early.”

Before I could say *it’s after ten, Carl*, he reconsidered. Not the part about breakfast though. “Or hell, if you want to throw some bills around, just gimme cash. I’ll get myself a nice, well-balanced lunch later.”

That wasn’t happening. He’d get himself more dip and a fifth of vodka.

“School supplies,” I said instead. “It’s July. You go back in what, a month? What are you going to need?”

Carl laid back, impaling his thin back on the jutting edges of the stairs, leaning his head back against one. He looked like he’d been dropped there from the sky, broken. “Nah, man,” he said tiredly. “I got pencils. School gives you everything you need.” He stared up at the sky for a minute, and

then said in almost a throw away mutter, “Could use some shoes.”

He was wearing good shoes. Nike Men’s Air Force 1s that looked brand new out of the box. I guessed he probably cleaned them every night, carefully removing scuff marks and buffing the midsole with his thumb. I remembered being in high school, putting all your faith into that one thing, polishing it and cherishing it and hoping that everyone saw it instead of everything else.

“Yeah, kid. Let’s get you some shoes.”

Shoes, it turned out, were Carl’s gateway drug. Once he had shoes, he wanted jeans, and then a shirt. He was as tightly guarded with these desires as I was with mine, but I recognized them, and he got the fucking jeans and shirt. And then he was so jacked up on excitement and uncertainty that I managed to buy him a burger.

He tore through it in a few bites, then leaned back. He was staring at me with an expression I recognized. Complete distrust. Why the hell was I doing this? What did I really want? Couldn’t be his mom, he could tell she wasn’t my type. Was I getting some sort of good press for this shit? He doubted it. It wasn’t like I was famous or anything. Was I a pervert? If so, I’d done a damn good job hiding it over the last few months.

Basically, the same thought process I’d gone through when I was in his position and Jack was the one buying the burgers.

“I want to talk about school,” I said, sensing that between the bags at his feet and the burger in his stomach, this was the time he was most receptive. “This is your senior year. You’ve stuck it out this long, you might as well finish strong.”

His dark eyes rolled up. “Yeah, I’m gonna graduate, old man. Don’t get your Depends in a bunch.”

That was what had struck me from the beginning about Carl. A lot of kids dropped out as soon as they turned sixteen. He was still there. He wanted to graduate. He wouldn’t tell me why, but I had a feeling there was a reason. A dream he had locked away in that heart of his, behind his skinny chest, beneath the oversized T-shirt. Something so private he only allowed himself to think about it once in a while.

I thought of myself, alone in bed. Sixteen and knowing that I could *do* something. That I was good at shit. But having no idea what all that added up to. Being terrified it was nothing. Hoping so badly it was something. Then tucking it back inside like a faded photograph, turning it face down so no one could see.

Jack had seen though. Fucking Jack, the reason I was here, in more ways than one. If I hadn't had a mentor myself, I'd sleep in on Saturday mornings.

"I want you to do more than graduate. I want to see you in college or trade school or wherever you need to be to get to where you want to be." I had a bribe lined up, too, but I wanted to see Carl's reaction to this first.

Carl snorted. "Okay, man. Sure." But I saw something new in the flinty, narrow eyed stare he gave me. I got the sense that he was taking my measure for the first time. Looking past the expensive haircut and casual polish that having money gave you. "Why do you do this shit?" he asked abruptly. "It's some sort of white savior high, isn't it? Help a poor kid and feel good about your fucking enormous carbon footprint or whatever."

I almost choked on my soda. The last thing I'd expected Carl to come out with was a slam on my carbon footprint, which was as small as I could get it. "You're white too, Carl," I said when I'd recovered. "In fact, you're Irish, so you're as white as they come."

He stared at me, still waiting for his answer.

I sighed and cracked my knuckles, wishing I'd gone straight to the bribe. There was no pat answer for why I did this shit. It didn't feel good to drag my ass out of bed at nine am and hang out with a teenager who looked like he hated my guts. "No, it's not a savior thing," I said finally. "It's just that it feels shittier to not do it than to do it."

Carl blinked, processing that. "So it does feel shitty?" he checked.

"Yeah, sometimes. But it's like, it's my turn, you know?" It had been a minute since I stumbled over words, but then again, I'd never had an audience as tough as a kid from the wrong side of Boston. I should know, considering I still was that audience, deep down. "Someone did it for me," I clarified. "And I was an asshole about it at first, but in the end, it was what I

needed.”

“And you think *I* need *you* like that? Okay, man.” Carl laughed, too long and too hard to be genuine. Necks craned as people in the food court looked over to see if they could catch the tail end of the joke.

I sat back and waited, thinking, *Jesus, this kid would be an asshole to the Dalai Lama.* Then thinking, *Just like you at his age.*

“Trade school or college,” I repeated. “Or military.”

“I’m not going in no military.” Carl drummed his fingers on the table, all tics and twitches and nerves. Now that he’d gotten real food in his stomach, he didn’t have the lethargic apathy of this morning, but the energy was too charged to be productive. He’d have to learn to focus it. “Maybe college,” he said grudgingly, as though doing me a favor. I got a glimpse of what might be on that faded photograph he kept pressed to his heart, face down.

“You get your application together, I’ll buy you another pair of shoes.”

I didn’t know if bribery was how the program intended big brothers to operate, but I didn’t care. A kid like Carl would purposefully drop the ball on his future to spite me if there wasn’t something in it for him.

When I dropped Carl back off at his house an hour later and headed back to my side of town, I felt like maybe I’d done something. Maybe I’d helped. At least I’d gotten the kid to eat something besides straight sugar and tobacco. But as the familiar shape of my side of town came into view, as I slid into my personal parking spot in the garage that cost twice what his sneakers cost me every month, his question came back to haunt me.

Why did I do this shit?

For all the reasons I’d told him, but for one more, too.

For the couple of hours I’d been focused on his problems, I’d been able to leave mine behind. The kiss that had haunted me all night, the feel of Layla in my arms—I’d managed to push it out of my head.

Now I was back, and so was it.

CHAPTER 15

LAYLA



I wanted to be irresistible on Monday morning, but I overthought it and changed my outfit so many times that Liv came out of her room to see what the hell I was doing banging my closet door open and shut so many times. Then, after the outfit was finally sorted, I almost forgot my lunch.

“You look great,” she insisted, grabbing my lunch bag out of the refrigerator and stuffing it in my hands.

I was wearing jeans, like everyone at the office did, but I was wearing heels and a tailored t-shirt, and I’d put my hair up because I thought it made me look older. More sophisticated. Something.

“He kissed you,” Liv reminded me as she walked me to the door. Then, because she had nothing else to do since I’d woken her up before her alarm went off, she walked me down the hall to the elevator bank. “He told you he wants you. What are you worried about?”

“That he won’t want me *enough* to break his stupid rules.”

Liv tapped her pointer finger on her chin and pointedly didn’t say anything. She didn’t think his rules were stupid. She thought it made perfect sense. But because she was my best friend—and potentially considering starting something up with my little brother—she kept her mouth shut. When the

elevator doors slid open, she said, “Have a good day, honey. Make good choices.”

“I’m trying,” I called as they slid closed between us.

At the office, Aiden had his door shut. I’d barely had time to put my purse down before Joe and Gloria were by my side. For an instant, I had the horror-struck notion that they’d seen Aiden and me at the game on Friday, that they were going to confront me now. But that was insane, of course.

“Surprise meeting,” Gloria said in tones so artificially bright that I knew it was not a good surprise. “We’re all about to meet Blake Morten, wundervet.” She said the last word in a German accent that made us all consider her carefully.

“What? The blonde hair, the blue eyes, the world domination attitude? He’s clearly a—”

“Gloria, please tell me you’re not about to refer to one of our clients as a Nazi,” Maureen said crisply, sailing past us. We fell into step behind her.

“No,” Gloria lied. “I was not.”

We followed Maureen to the best conference room, the one with the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the city. An administrative assistant was scooting around the long oval conference table, laying out napkins and water glasses. Two large pitchers of water sat in the center of the table. As we took our places, another admin assistant came in with a large round plate of bagels in one hand and a stack of cream cheese tubs in the other.

“Why are these all whole grain?” Gloria wondered, then at Maureen’s glare, pantomimed zipping her mouth shut.

“It’s because he’s a health nut, remember?” Joe spun one of the tubs of cream cheese around to read the label. Then he said something, but I didn’t hear it because Aiden was coming through the door.

He was wearing black jeans and a gray T-shirt that highlighted his broad shoulders and tapered torso. He also had a trace of a scowl on his face that he was in the process of erasing. In a moment, I saw why. Right behind him, glowing with a golden tan, blinding white teeth, and hair the color of old

gold, was Blake Morten. He was in many ways Aiden's mirror opposite. The same imposing height, the same length and breadth of body, but where Aiden was dark, he was light. In a story, Blake would be the white knight and Aiden would be the misunderstood bad boy on a redemption arc.

But despite the glowing good looks, there was something about him that I didn't like. It was impossible to put my finger on it. Maybe it was the way he dropped into his chair at the head of the table, lounging and indolent like he was one of the big cats he loved so much. I loved cats and their don't-give-a-damn attitude, too, but the attitude hit different in a human being.

He bestowed a shiny white, toothy smile on each of us in turn, but his glacier blue gaze snagged on me. "Hello," he said, drawing out the word. "Are you new here?"

Maybe if it was high school, I would have giggled like he so obviously expected. Now, though, I just smiled and said, "Yes. I'm Layla Davis."

"Layla Davis." He repeated my name, pronouncing each syllable with great care, like he was sounding it out. "Nice to meet you, Layla Davis."

The tension that had existed in Aiden from the moment he stepped into the conference room increased. It was nearly invisible, but I'd become an expert on Aiden in the past week. I recognized that the muscles at the base of his jaw were tighter than before. It pulled at the corners of his mouth until he was almost frowning.

"Layla is the newest member of our Brand Development team," he said in clipped syllables. "This is more of a watch and learn situation for her. Maureen will oversee our work on your brand, and Joe will be your main point of contact."

I bristled at the idea that I was so fresh that I had to *watch and learn*. I'd done two years in the cutthroat, fast paced environment of LA after all. I had just as much experience as Joe.

Blake gave me an intense look that rippled all the way through me, down to my toes. It wasn't thrilling or exciting though, the way Aiden's penetrating glances were. This one felt intrusive. The ripples were uncomfortable. I shifted in my seat, crossed my legs.

“This is my first time too,” he said in a quiet, confiding tone that felt too intimate for a conference room. Too intimate for any room with other people in it.

“Excuse me?” Aiden asked, his voice dipping into glacial territory.

“My first time being *developed*.” Blake stretched like—again, the image of a cat came to mind. A large tomcat who had been running the roost his whole life. “I’ve just been winging it up until now.” He flashed that ten-thousand-dollar smile. “But I guess I’ve done a pretty good job now that I find myself here having champagne with you fine folks.”

The way he talked was oddly familiar. It was nothing I could put my finger on exactly, but it was like he was speaking half in movie quotes. They were just familiar enough to catch my attention, but I couldn’t pin them to a specific movie or actor.

Across the table, Joe slid Gloria a sideways glance. He was confused. *What champagne?* The glance wondered. All we had were glasses of water and empty mugs because the coffee was still brewing at the other end of the room. The gurgling of the water as it began to bubble was the only sound for a long moment.

“Yes, I’d say you’ve done an excellent job.” Maureen took over the conversation smoothly when it became clear that Aiden had nothing pleasant to respond to Blake with.

The meeting was odd, to say the least. I’d met my fair share of entitled, narcissistic, overinflated egos in LA, but Blake was different. He was all of those things, but it was lacquered down under this bizarre pantomime of old school manners and charm. I could tell it fooled Gloria, Joe, and Andrew. They were under his spell immediately. Maureen didn’t know what to think. She thought something was off, but she wasn’t sure what.

And at the other end of the table, Aiden fairly vibrated with barely concealed dislike that Blake seemed to lean into like a flower turning its face to the sun. He could have easily ignored Aiden. I wasn’t even sure why the head of Cross Media was here, except to meet and greet an important new client. He certainly wasn’t saying much, but Blake purposefully lobbed the conversation his way, over and over. He seemed to enjoy Aiden’s terse

responses.

And when he wasn't baiting Aiden, he was looking at me.

On one level, it was flattering. On another, it was disconcerting. Plenty of men had shown interest in me over the years, but the way Blake did it was unusual. For one thing, we were in a *business* meeting. For another, he didn't seem particularly concerned about drawing me out or getting reciprocation. In some ways, his interest in me felt almost like a show rather than a real emotion he was feeling.

It was thoroughly strange and confusing, but there was one person who wasn't confused.

Aiden.

CHAPTER 16

AIDEN



The idle thoughts I'd had about firing Andrew suddenly felt quaint. I didn't want to fire Blake—I wanted to dismantle him. It wouldn't be murder because he wasn't a real person. If I wasn't seeing him in the flesh, I'd swear he was an AI bot. Dismantling was too much work. I wanted to just erase his code or pull the plug on the machine.

But the problem was that Blake *wasn't* a robot, AI or otherwise. He was real, and he was really looking at Layla like she was an ice cream cone and he'd just trekked across Death Valley. It would have been shitty if she'd returned the sentiment, but I could have handled it. What was worse was seeing her grow visibly more uncomfortable the longer the impromptu strategy session went on.

"The nerve of the guy just showing up here," I'd muttered to Maureen when I found out about his decision to drop by unannounced. I'd been irritated, but as the minutes ticked on, I was becoming closer to enraged.

Blake was up out of his seat, circling the table. He was holding his chin with one hand, and he was supporting his elbow with the other. A sort of mobile version of *The Thinker*. His circuit somehow never brought him all the way down to my end, but it did keep him in close proximity to Layla. The third time I saw her scoot her chair closer to the conference table, my self-control

snapped. I stood up suddenly and plonked my coffee cup down hard enough that the little bit at the bottom splashed up and onto the table.

Maureen's wide eyes were the only thing that arrested my next movement, which was to grab Blake by his steroid enhanced upper arm and tell him to keep the hell away from my staff. They were the jolt that reminded me that I was in an office building. *My* office building. This was a meeting with an asshole, not a brawl in a bar. Even if our client was asking for a punch to his dimpled chin didn't mean I could give him one.

I was the boss. A blessing and a curse. Wings and a leash.

With unimaginable effort, I reigned myself in and managed to slap a rictus smile across my face. "Blake, thanks so much for stopping by. I'm afraid we have to wrap it up for today."

Blake predictably came to a stop right behind Layla's chair. I cut my eyes at Maureen, who immediately pushed hers back.

"Already?" He frowned, like he was offended. "I think we were getting into some really good stuff here, Aiden."

Everyone I knew called me by my first name. Mr. Cross still sounded like my father to my ear. But what the hell gave *him* the right to it?

"Sorry *Blake*." I put emphasis on the name in the hopes he'd realize how stupid it was and go back to his given one, which was actually Jeff. "Joe will get in touch with you about setting up another meeting." I pushed back my chair and stood up. Maureen and the others followed suit.

Making no attempt to look casual, I made my way around the table and put myself between Blake and Layla before I reached out and shook his hand in a quick, firm goodbye. I could tell he wanted to object, but it was hard when Maureen was leading the way out of the conference room and Joe was insinuating himself between us, putting even another layer between Blake and Layla.

"Come on," I said to Layla, gesturing for her to go the other way around the table to get to the exit since Joe was blocking this one now. "I need to talk to you in my office."

Layla looked instinctively toward the door to see if any of the team had overheard. No one had. Joe was too busy talking Blake's ear off, and everyone else was already out of earshot. She looked back at me and nodded once.

There was a thrumming beat in the back of my brain. A warning call. It seemed like it was always playing in the background when Layla Davis was around, but now the bass had been turned up. The Brand Development team must have gone into Maureen's office because we didn't see any of them as we made our way back through the floor. Of the people who were there, no one looked twice at us as I led the way up the stairs and into my office.

Layla shut the door behind us, and the definitive *click* brought the pounding beat in my head to an abrupt halt. Silence filled the space between us. Heavy, textured. It had weight and it smelled like vanilla. It tasted like popcorn and beer and the velvety feel of her lips on mine. It was everything the music had been warning me about.

Layla pulled her hand off the knob slowly, like she was considering whether or not she should have done that.

"Sit down," I said, gesturing to one of the two chairs on the other side of my desk. Normally, I'd take one so I could talk to my team without the heavy oak desk between us. Today I thought it prudent to stay where I was.

Layla walked to the chairs, but she didn't sit down. "What's this about, Aiden?" she asked and picked up my empty coffee mug. I hadn't even had a chance to fill it before Blake fucking Morten had crashed my morning. She turned it until she could see the text. *World's Okay-est Boss*. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Maureen?"

"Yeah."

"She's great."

"I didn't bring you here to talk about Maureen."

Layla raised an eyebrow, somehow managing to look devilish and elegant all at once. She set the mug down. "Why *did* you bring me here then?"

Not to do what she was implying, though God knew I wanted that so much I

could taste it. “I don’t want you on the Blake Morten account,” I said abruptly, deciding there was no good way to ease into that conversation. “I know Maureen wants this to be your trial run, but I think it’s a bad idea.”

“My trial run?” Annoyance threaded Layla’s voice. She pushed her auburn hair back over her shoulder and frowned. “You do remember that I’ve already done this for two years in LA.”

“I remember, but PR and Brand Development aren’t synonymous.”

“Yeah, but it’s not about the work is it?” Now Layla sat down. She crossed her long legs. “It’s about Blake himself.”

Following her lead, I lowered myself into my own chair. “Yeah, it is,” I said frankly. “I can tell by the way he acted with you in the meeting that he’s going to be a problem.”

“And you think that in my two years in PR in LA, I didn’t learn to handle guys like Blake?” Layla’s voice was silky with confidence. She smiled privately, as if remembering the numerous ways she’d learned to put such men in their place. That look got in my veins and burned like whiskey. I wanted to reach across this desk and drag her across it. Not because I was anything like those men, but because she *hadn’t* put me in my place. She’d kissed me back, and I’d sensed that she was offering more.

“I’m sure you did,” I managed to say, my tightening throat strangling the words. “But we’re not that kind of workplace. *You* don’t have to handle those men. The company makes sure of it.”

“You mean you make sure of it.” Layla considered me. She didn’t look angry exactly. More stubborn. “You’re the company, Aiden.”

“Fine, yeah, *I* take care of it.” I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. I didn’t like the way she was looking at me. Like she was seeing something underneath my skin.

“Is this because—”

“It has nothing to do with Friday,” I cut her off.

Layla’s blue eyes widened and the corners of her mouth curved in a smirk. “I

was going to say, is this because of my dad.”

Fuck. Of course she'd meant Jack. It took Herculean effort to control my face, to keep my breathing steady and even. “Layla,” I said warningly.

“I know, I know.” She held up her hands as if to prove she wasn't holding a weapon. Like she needed one. This woman *was* a weapon. Her eyes, her smile, her body. All were lethal, and I was collateral damage. Then she knocked all thoughts of sex out of my head by saying, “But I'm not stepping back from Blake's account.”

“Yes you fucking are,” I said automatically. “I wasn't asking how you felt about it, Layla. I was telling you, as your boss.”

Again, that quick grin. “I like it when you pull rank, Aiden. But it's not going to work. If you pull me off, it's going to look strange.”

“No, it won't. Everyone saw how he acted toward you during the meeting.”

Layla raised her eyebrows. “*Did* they? Or were you maybe watching me a little closer than all the others? Because Blake was sprinkling creep vibes over Gloria, too.”

I frowned, trying to remember. Had he really? That was something I generally would have noticed, but then, I generally didn't have Layla in the room with me, dragging my focus away from the task at hand.

Layla uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, dropping her voice to a whisper. “You can't pull me off, Aiden, or you might as well tell everyone we kissed.” Her eyes were glinting with mischief. She knew she had me in a corner.

“Then tell Maureen he made you uncomfortable,” I ordered.

Layla shook her head slowly.

Lust and fury twined around each other and filled my chest. She was putting me in a fucking impossible situation and she knew it. Hell, she was reveling in it. “You're playing a dangerous game, Layla,” I said, my voice darkening.

“Maybe. But it's better than sitting on the sidelines.” She looked pointedly at the desk I'd put between us. Her voice dipped into a whisper again. “You

want me, Aiden. I want you. Let's stop pretending this is about Blake.”

I liked the way she threw his name away like it was garbage. A small part of me had wondered what the fuck I was going to do if Layla was actually flattered by his attention. I'd have had to drop the bastard as a client and take the loss. I wouldn't have been able to explain it to Maureen, but hell, that was becoming a running theme in my life anyway.

“I want you,” I agreed, keeping my words short. A tight leash was necessary for this conversation. If I said too much... God only knew what would happen. “But it can't happen.”

Layla only smiled.

CHAPTER 17

LAYLA



I didn't have a plan exactly. More of an idea of a plan. An outline of an idea, anyway. Basically it was to put myself in Aiden's way as often as possible until he gave in. Ironically, Blake made it easier for me. Aiden never followed through on his threat to take me off the account, and Blake never got the hint that we didn't need to meet with him every other day, so I saw a lot of both of them.

"I'm surprised Aiden is putting up with it," Gloria mused one evening when it was just the core group of us staying late. We'd had to rearrange our schedule due to one of Blake's unscheduled drop ins, so now the five of us were back in the conference room with our laptops, eating pizza.

"It's obvious why." Joe rubbed his thumb against his other four fingers.

Gloria scoffed. She and Joe were dating, or something like it, but they still never missed a chance to disagree with one another. "Cross Media is *the* go-to marketing firm in Boston these days. Local magazines are always doing profiles on the boss."

"Yeah, because he's hot."

For a second, I was afraid I was the one who had said this. It was what I was thinking, after all. But then it registered that it was a male voice. As one, we

all turned to look at Andrew, eyebrows raised. I felt a secret thrill at someone giving voice to my inner monologue.

He rolled his eyes. “Come on. Objectively speaking. He’s a good-looking dude.”

“I don’t know,” Gloria said, and we all pivoted to look at her. “No, not about that. The boss is hot. I mean, I don’t know about money being enough.”

Gloria had a habit of saying half of what she meant and making you dig for the second half. It was mysterious and annoying. I refocused on my computer while Joe and Andrew coaxed the rest out of her. Now that we were done talking about how good-looking Aiden was, I wasn’t interested. Until she said, “Well, I overheard him talking to Maureen earlier today, and it sounds like he wants to cut Blake loose. Maureen is trying to talk him out of it.”

“After all the work we’ve done?” Andrew asked, annoyed. “He could at least tell us if that’s what he’s planning so we know to stop wasting our time.”

“I think something happened. He sounded pissed.”

I was still looking at my screen, but all my attention was on Gloria now.

“Did he say why?” Joe asked.

“Not that I heard, but he said something about him being inappropriate.” Gloria shrugged. “I wish he’d be inappropriate with me.”

Andrew and I were very careful not to look at Joe. I was very careful not to look at anyone, in fact, because I had a bad feeling I knew what had set Aiden off. In Blake’s morning drop by, he’d sniffed my hair. It had been subtle. Strange. He’d done it on one of his continuous loops around the conference table. As he so often did, he’d come to a stop behind my chair. This time I’d felt the weight of his hands closing over the back. And then I’d heard the *sniff*. I’d nearly laughed at how odd it was, but then I’d seen Aiden’s face. He didn’t find it subtle or laughable.

Apparently, he found it to be a fireable offense.

I gritted my teeth, half encouraged by how much Aiden obviously cared, half mad. I was enjoying this project, despite the client at the center of it. I didn’t

want to see it come to an end just because Blake had a shampoo fetish.

“Maureen will talk him around,” Joe said confidently, recovering from his maybe-girlfriend’s comment about another man.

“Maybe.” Gloria said. “He looked mad.”

Half an hour later, we finished our work and got up to leave.

“I’ll take these to the break room trash can,” Joe said, gathering up the pizza boxes.

“No, I’ve got it.” I took them from him. “I forgot something at my desk anyway.”

“Do you want us to wait for you?”

I hesitated. I couldn’t say yes because my plan was to dump these empty boxes in the break room trash can and then confront Aiden. But did it look suspicious if I said no? Would they suspect? “No, I might hang out for a minute. My roommate is coming to meet me for a drink at a bar nearby,” I lied.

They accepted it without a flicker of skepticism. “A drink sounds good,” I heard Joe suggest to Gloria as they walked down the hallway toward the elevator with William.

“I’m tired.”

I felt a moment’s pity for Joe, then my heart kicked into overtime. I was about to be alone in the office with Aiden, which was something I’d tried to engineer before, but these weren’t ideal circumstances. I couldn’t focus on seducing him—I had to confront him over this Blake Morten situation first.

As I walked through the office with the pizza boxes in hand, I heard him talking in his office. At first, I worried that I’d been wrong—we weren’t alone. Then I realized he was on the phone. I listened as I crossed to the break room. It didn’t sound like work. He was laughing, and his voice was relaxed. He wasn’t uptight with anyone on the team, but this was different.

Familiar.

If I closed my eyes, I could almost hear that laugh in my memory. He and my dad, sitting on the back porch, each with a long neck bottle of beer. I heard it the night of my graduation party, and the sound had stabbed my heart because he was laughing with *Shara* who was wearing his ring.

It was funny how much could change in seven years. I'd been heartbroken then. I'd felt silly and like I'd always be too young. Unsophisticated. Naive. Now I left the break room and moved toward his office, feeling silkily confident. I had two goals—to make him relax about Blake, and to make him kiss me again.

Aiden was finishing up his phone call just as I reached his doorway. “Bye pal,” he said, and then he saw me standing there. He did a double take. “Fucking hell!”

“I didn't mean to scare you.”

Aiden looked at the phone to make sure he'd hung up before barking the oath. He had. Slowly, he set it down and looked back up at me. “What are you doing here, Layla?”

“I heard a rumor.”

His face darkened.

“Not about us. About you and Blake.”

His expression was black as he said, “What about me and Blake?”

I sat down, even though he hadn't invited me to. “Gloria overheard you talking to Maureen about not working with him anymore. Apparently, he did something inappropriate.”

Aiden stared at me impassively, neither confirming nor denying.

“So if you're talking about me,” I soldiered on, “I want to tell you not to do it.”

“It is about you,” Aiden said.

I'd half expected him to deny it. His admission caught me off guard. “It is?”

Aiden nodded slowly, as if he was already regretting being so truthful with

me. “I don’t like the way he acts around you. I’d do it for any employee.”

I stared at him, watching the way his mouth slowly tightened. His hands were curled tightly around the arm of his chair, bleaching the blood from his knuckles. He *had* to want me as much as I wanted him. Almost eight years ago, I had been naive and unsophisticated. I’d thought I was in love with him when I had no idea what love and lust really were. Now, though, things were different.

I stood up and walked slowly around his desk. He turned his chair to face me, his jaw still set, his hands still gripping the arm rests.

“You said you’d do it for any employee, but I’m not just any employee, am I?”

He shook his head grimly. “You know you’re not.”

I stopped a foot from him. I had gone far enough.

As if recognizing that I’d gone as far as I was going to, Aiden slowly unclenched his fists and stood up. He didn’t take a step forward, but he didn’t walk around me either. We just stood there, facing each other.

“This is a bad idea,” he said almost wearily, as though the words had become threadbare, their meaning worn out of the cloth.

“Looking at each other?”

His mouth hitched up in one corner. “I don’t want to just look at you, Layla.”

My heart hammered in my ears. My blood hummed, every sense attune to him. “I don’t want to just look at you, Aiden.”

He took a deep breath and I sensed the final battle was raging in his head. I held mine, waiting for the outcome. “Come over to my place,” he said, the words tearing out of his throat. “We can talk more.”

I sensed that if I told him I didn’t want to talk, it might be pushing him too far. He might revert. So I nodded as though it were plausible that we might just talk.

But I knew better.

I'd never been to Aiden's old place, but I knew instantly that the two-bedroom condo on the twelfth floor of a nice high rise only a couple miles from work was new since the divorce. The packing boxes still stacked against a wall and the dearth of furniture was a dead giveaway. In the living room, he had exactly one place to sit, and that was a long, three-cushioned couch. There was a packing box on either end, each one labeled *Books*.

I walked into his kitchen.

"Help yourself," Aiden said with a trace of irony as I opened his refrigerator and pulled out two beers.

"One is for you."

"Nice of you."

I found his bottle opener in the second drawer I tried and popped both tops. When he took it out of my hand, our fingers brushed. *Sparks*. I drank from mine, feeling the first flutter of nerves in a while. It was finally going to happen. Years of fantasies were about to become reality.

Aiden drank from his, and our eyes locked over the bottles.

"How long ago did you move in?" I asked. Now that it was finally here, I found I wanted to drag out the moments. Linger over them.

"Two years."

I almost choked on my beer. "Two *years*?"

Aiden raised an eyebrow, like he had no idea what was so surprising about that.

I looked around the kitchen at the bare counters. The refrigerator shelves had been as scantily clad as mine had the day I moved in. Uninvited, I wandered back into the living room and looked at it more closely. The coasters on the cardboard boxes that were currently serving as end tables were the only

indication they might be permanent fixtures.

“What are you doing?” Aiden asked, following me.

“You’ve lived here two years and you haven’t unpacked your books?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t had much time to read.”

I walked in the direction of the short hallway, off which were three doors. The one at the end was the bathroom. The one to the left was a room with a desk and more unpacked boxes. I hesitated before opening the door on the right.

“You can go in,” Aiden said. His voice was strained now. His gaze veiled. He was gripping the neck of his beer like he wanted to strangle it.

I walked in and saw a room that could have been ripped right out off the webpage of some fancy, minimalistic hotel. And I didn’t mean that in a good way. If you looked at my room, you knew I loved black and white photography and the color purple. Looking at Aiden’s room told me absolutely nothing about him. It was so nondescript it almost felt intentional. Like he might have to sublet it at any moment, and who could object to beige walls, a navy-blue comforter, and wood furniture?

“I have trouble getting too comfortable,” he explained, reading my mind. “Anywhere.”

I turned around to face him. I felt like he’d just told me paragraphs about himself in those six words. There was enough subtext to fill in some of the blank spaces in my mind. My heart simultaneously swelled and broke. He was so successful, but it was like he thought it could all be taken at any minute. It was why he worked so hard. Why he treated his employees like family. Why he didn’t have a single personal item on the surface of his nightstand.

Unable to stop myself, I crossed the room and stood right in front of him. “What about with me?”

Aiden’s gaze dipped. “I’m too comfortable with you. It’s a mistake.”

“Why is it a mistake?”

“Because I can’t have you.”

I set my beer on his barren dresser and put my hands on his shoulders. I’d barely had half of it, but I didn’t need liquid courage. Not for this. “I think you can.”

Aiden’s eyes were hot, but he didn’t make a move to touch me, even as I felt his muscles tense. His voice was low and scratchy when he said, “I can’t keep you.”

There it was again. That conviction that nothing could last. That nothing was really his. I slid my hands up to his face and pulled it gently down. Our foreheads brushed, and his eyes were glittering with need, but he still didn’t move. I wanted to kiss him so badly that my lips were tingling, but I had brought us this far. He had to meet me halfway.

“You can keep me tonight,” I whispered.

I saw the last of his resistance collapse, and his lips came down on mine. Triumph swelled in my chest, then was brushed away by overwhelming lust.

I kissed him back fiercely, pulling his face down to mine and wrapping my arms around his neck. I could feel every inch of his tall, rigid body pressed against mine. I’d already lost my equilibrium, but now I melted completely against him. My soft breasts were pressed against the topography of his muscled chest, rock hard torso, and long lean thighs, and our bodies fit together perfectly.

Aiden was kissing me, our mouths meeting and fusing, tongues intertwining. I was kissing him back frantically, still trying to pull him closer. One broad hand was sliding under the back of my t-shirt. His rough, splayed fingers spanned the expanse of my back, pressing me so closely against him that I could barely breathe. It felt good, but I wanted his hands somewhere else.

Without breaking the kiss, I pulled back just enough to get my hands in between us. I dragged my fingernails over the topography of his chest, feeling the hard muscle.

Aiden sucked in his breath and bit down on my lower lip. “Don’t forget all the reasons this could blow up in our faces,” he whispered, his voice a regretful warning.

As if I could. I kissed him to cut off any other warnings. I didn't want common sense right now. I wanted him.

Aiden's hands tightened at my waist, then reached for the hem of my shirt, pulling it up and over my head in one swift motion. It was warm in his apartment, the balmy evening air floating in through his open balcony door. Still, my skin prickled under his gaze, and my nipples tightened up into hard nubs.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do this," I whispered, tugging at the bottom of his shirt. I couldn't wait to feel his skin against mine.

Aiden gripped the hem and yanked it off as quickly as he had mine. I took a moment to admire the sight of his bare chest again. His muscles were sleek and well defined, his shoulders broad, his waist tapered. He was a man, and now I realized I'd only ever been with overgrown boys. I couldn't wait to touch him. Explore him. Make him mine.

I took my time doing so, running my hands around his hard torso, tracing a particular scar that cut across his shoulder. I knew he'd grown up in a bad part of town, but that was the extent of it. "What happened?" I whispered. As much as I wanted every part of his body, I wanted his stories even more.

"Broken bottle," he muttered absently, as if it was nothing. "When I was sixteen. Street fight."

I pressed my lips to it. I tried to picture it. Aiden, younger and wilder. Just as tall, but without the heft of muscle. Had he gone to the hospital or tried to sew it up himself? If I had to guess, it was the latter. Maybe my imagination was running away with me like it did so often when it came to him, but right now I felt so close to Aiden that I wouldn't have been surprised if I was seeing his memories. Reading his thoughts.

And I think it made him uncomfortable. This was an intimacy he wasn't ready for.

Aiden's hands had been stroking my back, now they stopped at the clasp of my bra. Now his eyes held the question. I nodded, and he tugged it free. Bare from the waist up, I pushed my hair back so he could see all of me.

His gaze heated. Past wounds were forgotten.

“You’re too good for me, Layla.”

“Don’t say that.”

Aiden ran his hands up and down my body and filled them with my breasts. I arched my back when he rolled my nipples between his fingers and a jolt of lust hit me right at the apex of my thighs. It felt like I was literally melting, my insides pooling into my panties. I reached for the zipper of his pants with shaking fingers. I wanted him inside me so badly that I could hardly stand it.

He was hard and ready as his pants fell from his waist. Then he pushed down his boxers and stood before me, naked and gorgeous as ever.

“My turn,” Aiden whispered as he reached for the top button of my jeans. There were two more after that. His fingers grazed my mound as he undid each one, and I got wetter and wetter. They slipped off my hips, and I stepped out of them, standing before him in just my red panties.

He backed me up until I was braced against the wall, then slipped his hand down between the fabric and my skin and parted my slippery folds with one finger.

“Yes,” I groaned, pushing against his hand. He was going exquisitely, painfully slowly like he could wait for his own satisfaction for hours. I gripped his shoulders and leaned my head back against the door as he moved his fingers in and out. The tension was building inside of me, increasing as he began to rub my clit in small circles. I didn’t know if it had gotten darker in the room or if my eyes were closed. All I could hear was our rapid breathing, all I could feel was the pleasure he was giving me.

I went over the edge with a violent shudder and a moan so loud I thought they could hear me down on the street. Then I would have collapsed if he hadn’t been there, holding me in place.

“Well, I guess I’ll be going now,” I managed to joke when I could speak again.

“Only if you want to kill me.”

“I don’t,” I said seriously. “I want to keep you.” I almost softened the sentiment by adding the word *around*, but I found that I couldn’t. I was

incapable of playing it cool right now. I'd just had the most intense orgasm of my life, and it was like a truth serum. I wanted to keep Aiden Cross, and I couldn't pretend otherwise.

Our gazes locked for a long moment, then Aiden picked me up like I weighed nothing. I wrapped my legs around his waist and found his mouth again, loving the way I was learning his body with mine. He was so strong—I couldn't imagine how he could be afraid of anything.

Aiden carried me until his knees hit the edge of his bed and he fell forward onto it, covering my body with his. His mouth was on mine before I could get my bearings. I kissed him back with all the passion that was building back up in my body. I reached down between our bodies and gripped the root of his rock-hard cock with my hands and guided it toward my opening.

Our eyes locked in the darkness. His dark blue eyes were still conflicted, as if he still thought that, even now, he might be able to stop himself.

I pushed up against him, willing him to trust himself to me. To forget all the things that stood between us. When Aiden finally pushed himself into me, I felt a hundred different nerve endings come to life for the first time. The groans that tore from my throat as he pushed deeper and deeper didn't even sound like me. They were animalistic, inhuman, but there was no room for embarrassment. Mindless pleasure was burning through every part of my body.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and tried to meet him thrust for thrust, but he was pushing into me so forcefully that all I could do was hold on as the pleasure built and built again. His lips found mine in the dark, and the thrusts of his tongue matched his hips.

"Aiden," I begged, but I didn't know what I was begging for. All I could say was his name, and then scream it as I went over the edge again. He pounded into me, and I lost all track of time. Then a guttural noise ripped from his throat, and I felt a shudder rock through his entire body as he collapsed onto me.

I stroked his sweat-dampened neck, running my hands down his back and then up to rub his head. His hair felt like cat fur beneath my fingers—the only soft thing about him. I could feel his heart slamming against his chest, all the

way into mine. I could feel every pulse point of my own, too, like my blood was vibrating in my veins.

I stared up at the ceiling in wonder as his breath slowed. After all the time I'd spent fantasizing about this moment, it should have disappointed me. Instead, it blew even my best fantasy out of the water. It was hard to breathe with his weight fully pressed down on me, but I didn't want him to move. Not yet. I'd waited too long.

But he must have known because too soon, he pushed his weight up onto his elbows and looked down at me.

I stared up at him. Once again, I was unable to stop myself from saying the words that were floating through my mind. "I didn't know it could be like that."

His eyes had a strange, fractured look in them. Satisfaction and regret and desire. "I didn't know either."

And then his mouth found mine again.

CHAPTER 18

AIDEN



I didn't sleep that night. I had Layla curled up against me, her body warm and her breathing even as a metronome. The moonlight was streaming through my curtainless windows, and I caught the down notes of the band playing at the bar across the street. How many nights had I spent sleepless, staring at the ceiling, listening to that bar's live music? More than I could count. I'd never needed much sleep, and since the company got so busy, I needed even less.

I was tired now though. Bone deep weariness that came from being in an impossible situation. I'd crossed the line with Layla, but there was no way in hell I was going to cross back. It had been hard enough to resist her when I didn't know what it would be like between us. Now I knew, and nothing was going to keep me from her.

Not even Jack.

The exhaustion moved into my bones. I'd have to tell him eventually. If this had been a one-time thing, maybe we could have gotten away with it, but it wasn't going to be that.

I turned my head to look at her. In the moonlight, her hair was dark as shadows, her eyelashes were black crescents against her cheeks, and her skin was a pale silver. We'd fallen asleep naked, and she had one slim arm draped

over my chest. Her breasts were warm against the side of my body. I felt a swell of gratitude that I'd never felt for any woman before. I'd appreciated them all. Loved a few. But this was something different.

I felt *moved* by the sight of Layla in my arms. My throat felt tight. My heart felt too full. It was a wholly new feeling, something I'd only seen on other men's faces a few times and never really understood. It felt like love, but it couldn't be. We'd slept together *once*. It had taken me three months to tell Shara I loved her.

I had convinced myself to love Shara. I could see that now. Because she was kind and she cared about animals more than her hair and she came from a family that prioritized education and culture and all the shit mine hadn't. She spoke French fluently, and on top of it all, she was beautiful. I'd gotten a little high off the idea of being with someone like her. Full of myself that she loved me when ten years ago, she would have been out of my league.

But it hadn't really been love, and it hadn't come close to filling the void I'd told. Now, holding the one person in the world I really shouldn't be touching, I couldn't feel disgusted with myself. I was too struck by the realization that I couldn't feel the missing piece anymore. I probed for it, like a tongue searching for a sensitive tooth, but there were no pangs.

I stared down at Layla and wondered if she was what had been missing, or if this was a coincidence. She sighed in her sleep and turned so her forehead was resting against my shoulder, my arm pillowing her head, a long sheaf of silky hair curving down her pale back like wings.



Just before dawn, when the moon had long slid out of view and the sky was lightening to a jeweled blue, I disentangled myself from Layla as gently as possible. Free of the weight of her head, my arm felt strangely light as I found my sweatpants and pulled them up over my hips. Out in the kitchen, I made coffee and took the first cup out onto the deep balcony that overlooked the last few streets of the city and, just beyond it, the harbor. My plan was to

work for an hour, then wake her up. I'd only just gotten my computer powered up though when I heard the glass door slide open behind me.

Layla stepped out, wearing my t-shirt. It showed all of her long, slim legs, from her bare feet to her upper thigh.

“That’s a good look on you.”

She looked down at herself and smirked. Pointing a toe, she said, “Yeah? Maybe I’ll wear it to the office.”

“Sure, but first let me gouge out Blake Morten’s eyes.” I thought about it. “And Andrew’s. And Joe’s.”

Layla laughed and took my laptop out of my hands. Setting it on the other chair, she slid into my lap. “You can’t blind the whole office. How would they develop brands?”

“Fuck it. I’ll sell the company.” I wrapped my arms around her waist and rested my chin on her shoulder. Absently, she curved her arm up to run her fingers through my hair while we both stared out at the view. It didn’t feel like any morning after I’d ever had.

Layla’s thoughts must have been tracking mine, because she murmured, “This feels—”

Right, I wanted to say, but that seemed like too much. “Good,” I said instead, because it did.

“Really good,” she agreed. She looked back at me. The rising sun put the red back in her hair that the moon had taken out. The disparate strands looked like they were on fire, and the flames made her blue eyes even more electric. “You don’t regret it?”

I shook my head. “Wish I did. It would be easier that way.”

“Not for me.” She kissed me, and the caffeine in the coffee became unnecessary. Kissing Layla made me feel like I was waking up for the first time. Seeing a different color on the spectrum. It was good and terrifying at the same time. If I let her, she would change everything.

Time passed, but I had no idea how much. I only knew that when we

surfaced, the sun was higher in the sky. There were more cars on the streets below. We went inside and saw that it was dangerously close to time to leave for work. We hadn't showered, and worse, Layla hadn't brought a change of clothes.

"I'll borrow something," she decided, and let herself into my walk-in closet. It was half empty. There was a box labeled *Shara's clothes*, stuff she'd left behind when she moved out of our old place. We both looked at it silently, then Layla turned back to the rack that held my minimal collection.

"I wore jeans, so I just need a different shirt," she said. She pulled a plain white t-shirt off a hanger. "I'll make this work."

I was privately convinced that she wouldn't be able to. That everyone would look at her and know we'd just spent the night together. But the idea of my shirt on her soft skin was so appealing that I couldn't care to worry.

CHAPTER 19

LAYLA



I got away with wearing Aiden's t-shirt with my jeans and blazer that first day. After that, we were more careful. I went to my place first to get a change of clothes, and then after a couple weeks, I began keeping things at his place. We were careful in other ways, too. Careful not to be alone together at the office, careful not to let our gazes clash for too long. It was easy enough during the workday—it was the happy hours, working dinners, and the last baseball game of the season that made things tricky. Inhibitions lowered. Stolen glances lingered for too long. More than once, we found ourselves sneaking off to find a place to be alone.

Still, we got away with it. Liv and Bran were the only other two souls in the world that knew about us, and even Aiden didn't know about that. I wanted to tell him, but he had been so adamant that we had to keep this a secret just between the two of us that I didn't know how to tell him it wasn't. I'd never been a particularly secretive person, so it was strange to suddenly have two big ones from the people who mattered most to me in the world.

Aiden was a secret from the rest of my family.

Bran and Liv's knowledge was a secret from Aiden.

Both stuck in my heart like burrs. Every time I bumped up against one, I felt a short, sharp jab.

Not quite pain, but an uncomfortable sensation that something was wrong. I shouldn't be lying to any of them, but that was what I'd signed up for when I pursued my father's best friend. And even though it didn't feel right to deceive them, everything else felt too good to stop.

The reality of being with Aiden in every way I'd ever imagined as a lovelorn teenager eclipsed the fantasy. When he touched me, the dazzling array of feelings and emotions were so intense it made me wonder how I'd ever thought I was really in love with Christian. That pallid, washed-out version of a relationship felt like something different from what was happening between Aiden and me.

One night, as Aiden worked on his laptop on the balcony and I sat out there with him, drinking a glass of wine, he brought up what we'd been careful not to bring up.

My dad.

"I'm getting a beer with Jack this week," he said without looking up from his screen. The harsh blue light brought the hard planes of his face into a strange relief. I could see his frown clearly enough, but the look in his eyes was lost to shadow.

Jack. He never referred to him as my dad anymore. It put distance between us and the overwhelming problem of my parentage. I twisted the wine glass in my hands and took another sip. "Why?"

"Because I haven't seen him in a bit."

"Isn't that normal?"

Aiden shrugged his shoulders. "We catch a game or grab a beer every month or so."

I did the calculation in my head. I'd been working at Cross Media for just over two months now. They were overdue. "What are you going to talk about?" I asked.

Aiden cut a quick look at me over the top of his screen. "I'm sure you'll come up."

My breath caught.

“Because he’s going to want to know how it’s going, you know. You are working at my company.”

Of course. I was caught in the eddying forces of relief and disappointment. I couldn’t imagine my father knowing that Aiden and I were together. But it was getting equally hard to imagine how we’d get away with not telling him eventually. This thing between us wasn’t going away. It wasn’t burning out or fading. If anything, it was getting more intense by the day.

Reading my mind—or maybe my face—Aiden said, “Do you want me to tell him?”

His tone was unreadable and his expression in that blue light was opaque. Looking at him gave me no clues on how to answer, and I needed clues. I myself was caught dead center between ‘hell no’ and ‘yes, might as well get it over with’. I took another sip of my wine to delay answering, then said, “Do you want to tell him?”

Aiden blew out his breath in a short, explosive sigh. “Yes. No. Fuck, I have no idea, Layla.”

I laughed, the tension easing. “I feel exactly the same.” I stood up, and when Aiden closed his computer, I slid into his lap. He was still wearing the clothes he’d worn at the office. The maroon V-neck shirt that everyone teased him about because it was a rare spot of color in his wardrobe. I slipped my hand underneath the hem and felt his strong stomach muscles tense. I curled up on his lap and explored the rigids of his abdomen, feeling his breathing change.

“I don’t know if you should do that while I’m talking about Jack,” he managed.

I kissed the side of his neck. “I don’t know if you should talk about Jack while I’m doing this.”

Aiden slipped his hand underneath my shirt, and I felt his broad hand span the width of my back. “That’s a good point.” He cocked his head to get a better look at me. “I’ve wanted to unbutton this shirt all day.”

My breathing quickened, but I kept my voice light. “I could tell by the way

you were on your laptop when I got here.”

He bared his teeth in a grin, unbothered. “Work. It never ends.”

“That’s why Cross Media is one of the top marketing firms on the East Coast.”

He didn’t say anything, but I knew him well enough to recognize the gleam in his eye as pride. The faint smirk playing at the corners of his mouth was pleasure. “My ace Brand Development team helps.”

I snorted, refusing the implied compliment. “Yeah, my two months at the company has really elevated you.”

“Oh, it’s elevated me,” Aiden murmured. He pushed my hair off my shoulders and undid the top button of my blouse.

I slid my hand down to the bulge in his jeans, and he hissed in his breath. His fingers shook as he undid the next two buttons, revealing my white bra. “You don’t know what these button downs do to me,” he muttered.

I laughed quietly. “Yes, I do. Why do you think I wear them?” I stood up just long enough to unsnap my jeans and push them down to my ankles. Then I climbed onto his lap again, this time straddling him. It wasn’t comfortable with the sides of the chair digging into my calves, but I liked the friction of his jeans through my thin cotton panties. I liked the illusion of being in control, even though I could feel the strength in his hands when they came up to grip my waist. His body was all lean muscle, hard where mine was soft, thick where mine was slim.

I couldn’t wait much longer.

I unbuttoned his shirt, tossing it aside, then unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. I pulled them off, revealing his boxers and his hard length straining against the fabric. I slid his boxers down, revealing his thick seven inches of manhood, already dripping with pre-cum. I leaned forward, licking the tip of his dick, tasting his salty offering.

Sitting up, I slowly lowered myself onto his cock, letting out a low moan as I felt him enter me. I began to ride him, bouncing up and down, enjoying the sensation of him inside me; I threw my head back and moaned loudly as I felt

his length stretching me open, filling me completely. I looked down at him, smiling at how beautiful he looked beneath me.

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close, and we kissed again, our tongues exploring each other's mouths. I sat up straight and he began to thrust into me, fucking me with long, slow strokes. My breasts bounced up and down as he thrusts deeper, my nipples hard and sensitive.

I began to grind my pussy into him, feeling every inch of his length destroy my insides. He grabbed my breasts, squeezing them roughly, and I felt myself getting close to orgasm. I bit my lip, trying not to scream, as I came. He kept pounding into me until I came down from my high and then I felt him release.

We stayed glued together on the chair for a long time, our warm, damp bodies pressed together.

“It’s a good thing you’re on the top floor,” I said finally into his shoulder, and felt his body quake with laughter.

“That’s not why I chose it, but now I’ll live here forever.”

Without meaning to, my mind picked up on the word. *Forever*.

Could we ever have that?

CHAPTER 20

AIDEN



I was late meeting Jack because Blake Morten had invited Layla to a charity ball being held by a wealthy fan in order to raise money for his foundation. He wasn't inviting her as his date, he swore. He knew she was new and this would be a good chance to see more of his brand. Or so he said.

"His brand is YouTube," I said when Maureen—not Layla—mentioned it on our way to get our second cup of coffee on Monday afternoon. "She can see all of his brand that she wants without leaving her house." My heart was pounding an ugly rhythm. Electricity had shot into the palms of my hands, and I'd curled my free hand into a fist instinctively. Then I shoved it in my pocket because Blake Morten wasn't here to punch.

"It was YouTube. Then he hired us to expand on it," Maureen reminded me. She seemed distracted.

I shot her a sideways look. I didn't expect Maureen to feel the same defensive rage at the idea of our client trying to move in on one of our team members as I did. She wasn't secretly sleeping with said team member, after all. But I expected her to exhibit some level of indignation.

She blinked over at me and seemed to realize where my thoughts had gone. "Oh, I'm not pleased," she assured me. "But Layla's an adult, and this *is* a good opportunity to network with the other stakeholders of his brand. I was

thinking about sending Joe with her.”

Our arrival at the coffee shop preempted my response. We went in, got our travel mugs filled, made small talk with the owner, and as soon as we hit the sidewalk again, I went right back to it. “You say it like it’s a done deal that Layla’s going.”

“It is a done deal, as far as I know. Layla asked me if I agreed it would be a good learning experience. I said sure, but she should watch herself around him. She said she could handle it, and I believed her.” Maureen shrugged as if that was all there was to it.

The ugly feeling was moving into my throat. “You shouldn’t have approved that without running it by me first. I’m the CEO.”

Maureen stopped dead on the sidewalk and turned to stare at me. “And *I’m* head of Brand Development.”

“But it’s my neck if this asshole tries something with her and she sues for sexual harassment and it hits the news,” I snapped.

Maureen’s eyebrows rose slowly up her forehead. “That’s quite the extrapolation, Aiden.”

“Maybe, but it’s not that big of a stretch.”

She looked at me so intently that I thought she was about to call me out. Instead, she shrugged and said, “So we send Joe, too. But she might not take kindly to feeling like we’re sending a babysitter with her.”

“It’s a babysitter or—” I swallowed the ever-present threat to drop Blake as a client. That was too far. Maureen would know. “—or I’d rather she reconsider,” I managed to temper my response.

The conversation with Joe that followed took up part of my afternoon, which meant I was fifteen minutes late meeting Jack.

“Sorry,” I said, sliding onto the barstool beside him. “Work shit.”

Jack nodded, unconcerned. “I had beer and the game to entertain me.” His attention was still fixated on the screen. I waved down the bartender and got myself a drink. I needed one just now. I’d told Joe he was going to this

charity ball, which was apparently in New York, but I hadn't told Layla yet. I didn't think it would go over well. But I didn't care. I was low level pissed that she had asked Maureen for permission when she knew *my* answer would have been hell no.

I tried to push that to the back burner, but when Jack finally tore his attention away from the game, he caught the scowl on my face. "Bad day at the office?"

"No. We just have an asshole client." I stared at my beer as an idea occurred to me. A very bad idea. An idea that didn't stand a chance of working. "And he has his eye on your daughter," I said anyway.

Now I had Jack's full attention. He was like the suburban version of a comic book hero. Mild mannered by day, but if you fucked with his family, he could go full vigilante. As I watched, his eyebrows snapped down. His jaw squared. His lips formed a dangerous line. "Come again?"

I was well aware I'd fucked up, but hell. I'd gone too far to turn back now. I quickly outlined the situation with Blake Morten—careful not to give Jack any identifying details. "I don't trust the jackass, so I'm sending another person from the team with her."

Jack's face hadn't relaxed a millimeter the whole time I was talking. And now that I was done, it was still frozen in that pissed off mask. "You say it's not necessary for her to go on this trip? Like this isn't necessarily part of the job?"

Shit. I'd fucked up so bad. "Look, Jack. I'm sending someone with her. Hell, *I'll* go with her if it'll make you feel better, but Joe is more than capable of—"

"It would make me feel better if you went instead," Jack interrupted.

I swallowed uneasily, well aware I'd just made things worse. When this all came out—and it would all come out—Jack was going to remember that he'd sent me to New York City to protect his daughter, when all along, I was the asshole he should have been worried about. But I'd painted myself into this corner, and when I did something, I did it well. There was no way out. "Then I'll go, Jack." I did my best to make my voice sound relaxed rather than placating. "No problem."

Finally, some of the tension eased out of his jaw. He picked up his beer again and took a long drink. When he set it back down, he looked like my old buddy Jack again. “Not like you have anything better to do, right?” he asked, half-joking, half-prying.

“Nah, nothing better,” I agreed.

“You don’t sound too worried about it.”

“I got divorced for a reason, Jack.” I stretched my arms over my head and did my best to put off the impression of what I had been just a few months before—happily single, enjoying my bachelorhood. I even glanced around, in case Jack was wondering why I hadn’t automatically scoped out the women in the bar.

“I know. I guess I just figured you’d remarry eventually.”

He said it in an offhand way that took me aback. “Why’s that?” I asked, genuinely curious. I’d never really seen myself as the marrying type. Shara had confirmed it. Only since Layla upended everything I thought I knew about myself had I even considered whether I’d get married again.

And the answer was no, not unless it was to a woman who made me feel the way she did. And when I really let my guard slip, the answer was no, not unless it was to Layla.

Had Jack seen something in me I didn’t? Again?

“Because you’re dead loyal.”

I snorted. “Yeah, it wasn’t cheating that drove Shara away.”

“I’m serious. Look how long we’ve been friends. Look how long people stay with your company.” Jack said it like it was obvious. Like I must have known because everyone else did. “You stick with people. It makes them want to stick, too.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m an old fart for thinking so, but that seems like a good foundation for a marriage.”

“If you find the right one.”

He grimaced. I think Jack sometimes felt guilty, like he’d pushed me to marry Shara. Which was fucking stupid because he knew I didn’t do anything

I didn't want to. "Yeah, if you find the right one." He looked over at me, his eyes the exact same color as Layla's. "You're just going to let that go?"

"Let what go?"

"I called myself an old fart and you didn't say shit."

"You're old as fuck," I doubled down. "Methuselah could learn a thing."

Jack and I stayed at the bar for another hour, catching up and giving each other more shit. I didn't bring up Layla again, but he did toward the end.

"I'm grateful to you, pal. I was worried that she'd end up going back to LA, but she's happy at Cross Media."

"Glad I could help." I signaled for the check. If we were back on the subject of Layla, it was time to go. I wasn't such a shitty friend that I could talk about her welfare with her father when, unbeknownst to him, she was waiting for me back at my apartment.

"It just never felt right having her across the country. When you have kids, you'll see what I mean."

I snorted. "If I have kids, you mean. Unless that's another thing you see in your crystal ball for me."

Jack shrugged mysteriously, then dropped the act with a grin. "If you have them," he agreed. He handed his credit card to the bartender before I could.

"I was supposed to buy *you* a beer."

"I know, but you made sure my kid stayed on the right coast so I figure I owe you one."

Guilt closed up my throat again. Two fucking beers in and I wanted to confess everything. But Layla was going to be pissed off with me already for what I'd told Jack about Blake. Deciding unilaterally to tell her dad we were sleeping together was probably the worst follow up move I could devise.

"There," Jack said when he'd signed the credit card receipt. "Now we're even."

I snorted. "Good to know what your family is worth to you."

Jack's smile was quicksilver. "Everything."

Mine faded. Yeah, I already knew that about Jack. Just like I knew he never thought Layla's ex was good enough for her. He wanted a prince for his eldest. Not a divorced man seventeen damn years her senior.

I was in a weird mood when I got home. Layla was already there. Through the sliding glass door, I could see her sitting on the balcony. She had her feet propped up on the railing, reading a book with the last of the sunlight. I leaned against the wall in the hallway for a minute and just watched her. I already knew this from work, but her concentration was insane. I knew that down below, horns were honking and the band at the bar next door was cranking, but she didn't look up once. She just kept flipping the pages, reaching over for her glass of wine once in a while, snagging it by the stem and moving it to her mouth without breaking her concentration.

She looked so peaceful, so relaxed.

I almost regretted the fight we were about to have.

CHAPTER 21

LAYLA



I sensed Aiden’s mood even before I saw his face. It was the way he moved when he came out onto the balcony. A stiffness in the set of his shoulders that was echoed in his face when he turned around. He lowered himself into the chair beside mine without kissing me first.

I closed my book, keeping my finger between the pages to save my spot. I had a pretty good idea what this was about.

Aiden didn’t waste time getting to the point. “You went around me.”

“I went up the chain of command,” I countered. “I report to Maureen.”

“I don’t give a damn who you report to at work. You went around *me*.” He bit off the words. “Not as your boss, but as your—whatever the fuck we’re doing is called.”

“I think that about describes it,” I drawled, hoping to tempt him out of this fight. I dogeared the corner of my page and set it down beside my chair.

Aiden wasn’t tempted though. Or amused. If anything, his face grew stormier. “If that’s all it was, I wouldn’t bother.”

I stood up and slid into his lap anyway, settling against his unyielding chest where I could feel the anger trapped in his lungs. “I know it’s not all,” I said

quietly.

“I don’t lie to my best friend for a fuck.”

“I don’t lie to my family for one either. I’m sorry you feel like I went around you. I don’t know what the protocol is for this.”

His eyes flickered to mine. “Yeah, you do. When it comes to Blake, you come to me.”

I blew out my own breath, frustrated. “It’s not that simple, Aiden. This isn’t just about Blake. It’s about my career. This is a good learning opportunity for me. Maureen thinks so, too.”

“I see how he looks at you. He puts his fucking hands on you right in front of me. What do you think he’s going to do if he gets you alone in a hotel elevator?”

“Have you thought about what *I’d* do?” I counter. “I’m not some damsel in distress, Aiden. You think Jack Davis didn’t put his kids through self-defense classes? You think I let my boyfriend take care of me when I was working with LA guys who were ten times more entitled than Blake? Believe me, that’s not what happened.”

“Then your ex is a fucking idiot,” Aiden snapped. For the first time, his arms tightened around me. “No wonder Jack didn’t like him.”

That was news to me. I leaned into his embrace and turned it over in my head. My dad hadn’t liked Christian. Funny, he’d never let on, and my dad wasn’t shy about sharing his opinion. That had my mom’s influence all over it. I could practically hear her counseling him. *Jack, nothing makes a guy more attractive than parental disapproval. So unless you want him as a son-in-law, keep your mouth shut.*

I smiled a little, thinking about how hard that must have been for him.

Aiden cleared his throat as if he were going to say something, then stopped.

“What?” I looked up at him.

I could see him clearly. The sun wasn’t quite down yet, and the sky was a rosy orange that put a touch of gold in his skin.

“Nothing,” Aiden said after a second. “Let’s change the subject.”

The next morning at work, I got a pretty good clue about what Aiden hadn’t said the night before. What he should have gone ahead and said so I didn’t have to find out about it from Joe.

“Guess what,” he said morosely in the break room. His skin looked gray, like he hadn’t slept well. His usual good mood was gray, too. I assumed he and Gloria were fighting again.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m your honor guard for the charity ball in New York.”

For a moment, I was distracted by the way he tried to put enthusiasm into his voice and failed miserably. Sympathy was beginning to pulse through me when the meaning of his words sunk in.

“Wait, what? You’re my what?”

Joe had never looked less swashbuckling, but he made an attempt. “Upper management decided that sending you alone might be more in Blake’s best interest than yours. So now I’m going, too. Never fear, I will be here. There. Whatever.”

“Upper management?” I repeated.

“Maureen and Aiden. I assume. Aiden is the one who told me.”

I lost my appetite. “When did he tell you?”

Joe glanced at me, sensing for the first time that this news might not be as benign as he thought. “Um, yesterday?” He scratched his nose and eyed me, checking to see how that information went over. When my face darkened, he added, “Maybe. I don’t remember.”

“Well I just talked to Maureen about it yesterday morning, so either it was

yesterday or it was really early this morning,” I said evenly.

“Yeah, it was probably yesterday.” Joe pulled an apologetic face. As if he were the one with something to apologize for. Then he wrapped up his uneaten egg sandwich and made a quick exit.

I stayed in the break room for another few minutes, trying to get a handle on my anger. My tendency was to go with the emotion—let it swell and break and deal with the cause of it. I didn’t like to let things fester. This time, though, I really did try to tame it. I asked myself if I was being unreasonable—maybe this wasn’t actually Aiden treating me like a child. Maybe there was some way in which he could ask my male colleague to babysit me and still think of me as a professional.

No, I answered my own question. There wasn’t.

I pulled out my phone. I wasn’t going to confront him in his office. It would look too suspicious. I would text him and ask him to meet me in one of the upstairs conference rooms. But as I unlocked my phone, I saw a message from my father.

Hey Layla, can you give me a call? I’m a little concerned about something.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Did he know? Had Aiden let something slip last night that tipped him off?

There was only one way to find out. I took the elevator down to the ground floor, stepped outside, and pressed ‘call’.

“Layla,” he trumpeted by way of answer when the call connected.

“Please don’t sing,” I said. “It’s creepy.”

“Why? Because it’s a love song from a man to another man’s wife?”

“Yeah, and you’re my dad.”

“And don’t you forget it. Listen, the reason I was calling—”

I felt my ears go numb as my dad began describing his concerns about Blake Morten. My heart was beating an uneven rhythm. There was fury sparking up in the synapses of my brain. “How did you hear about it?” I asked when he

was done.

“Aiden told me.”

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. I hadn't really needed to hear him say it, but the confirmation sealed it. The anger I'd tried to manage, to reason with, broke through the floodgates. “I have to go, Dad.”

He let me go with a cautious, “bye, honey. Love you.” He knew I was pissed. He didn't know how pissed, though, and he didn't realize that the weight of it was aimed at Aiden rather than him. Sliding my phone in my back pocket, I stood on the sidewalk and stared back at the building. If I bothered to count, I could locate Aiden's exact window.

I didn't bother though. And the idea of working half a floor away from him for the rest of the day was suddenly gallingly incomprehensible. I went back in just long enough to grab my laptop off my desk and stop by Maureen's office.

“I think I'm coming down with something.” I coughed into the crook of my elbow and made a face. “Can I work from home today?”

“Yes, of course.” Maureen tilted her head, concerned. “You can take a sick day, too, Layla. Don't feel like you have to push through if you don't feel well.”

“No, I can definitely work. I just don't want to get anyone sick,” I assured her. No way was I taking the day off and giving Aiden the space he needed to take me off the Blake Morten account entirely. I wouldn't put it past him. Not only was he sending Joe as my babysitter, he had told my dad.

Anger and embarrassment fueled me all the way home.

“Hey,” Liv said, startled when I came through the door. She spotted my pale face, the burning spots of color on my cheek. “What's wrong?”

I threw my laptop down on the couch beside her and went into the kitchen. I'd initially lost my appetite, but keeping up this level of anger was hungry work. I made a snack while I told her.

“Easy on the cabinets,” Liv said at one point. Then, when I was done. “Jesus.

That is... bad.”

“It’s really bad.” I threw myself down on the couch with my sandwich.

Liv eyed it but didn’t say anything about crumbs. “What are you going to do?” she asked instead.

I made a broad gesture with my hand that was meant to indicate *how the hell should I know?*

Liv got up and got a plate. Sitting back down, she slid it under my sandwich. “Are you going to talk to him about it?”

I took a bite and chewed aggressively. “I have to, don’t I?”

She lifted her shoulders. “Either that or quit.”

“I’m not quitting.”

“Then yeah, you’ll have to talk to him.” She pulled an apologetic face. “You think you can do it without yelling?”

My eyebrows drew down. I took another bite and chewed viciously.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Liv sighed and turned back to her computer. “Good luck.”

CHAPTER 22

AIDEN



When I heard that Layla had gone home sick, I texted her.

Are you going to my place? I'll try to leave, too.

She didn't answer. I figured she'd take a nap, but hour by hour crawled by without a response. At lunch, I stepped outside and called her. It went straight to voicemail. I texted again, but I was starting to get the bad feeling that this silence had nothing to do with a cold or a nap.

At four, I told Maureen I was leaving early.

"You'd better not be sick, too," she warned.

"I'm not. I'll be online." I was too distracted to worry about whether she thought it was suspicious that I was leaving early.

"What about the happy hour?"

I'd already been walking toward the door, but now I pulled up short. I'd forgotten all about the damn happy hour. It wasn't for anything in particular, just a monthly get together where I got face time with anyone who wanted it, and we patronized our favorite local bar. It wasn't the most important thing in the world, but I tried to never miss it.

“Shit,” I muttered. I stared down at my phone as if hoping that Layla would have texted in the last thirty seconds, clearing everything up.

“Just go,” Maureen advised. “I’ll be there to field the complaints and buy the first round.” She flicked me only the briefest glance, but I thought I saw curiosity in it. My stomach tightened, but there was no turning back now. Staying wouldn’t alleviate suspicion if it had taken root in her mind.

The tension moved through my body as I drove home. The longer I went without hearing from Layla, the surer I was that her silence was deliberate. When there was no sign of her in my apartment, I went out onto the balcony and bracketed the railing, squeezing until I felt the metal grinding against the bones of my hand. I called her again and got no answer.

If I was smart, I would have done exactly what I’d told Maureen I would. Log on and get my last couple hours of work done for the day. A very stupid thing to do would be to drive over to her apartment and jump start the fight we were about to have.

I stood out on my balcony a little longer and then got back in my car. Fuck the rational thing to do. If she wasn’t going to answer my calls, she was going to have to answer the door. I knew I was risking blowing our cover, but I couldn’t wait any longer.



A man was jogging up the front steps to the front door of the building when I started up them. When he paused to hold the door for me, glancing over his shoulder as he did so, I nearly tripped.

My heart stopped. How the fuck was I going to explain this?

“Aiden?” he asked, but the voice wasn’t Jack’s.

My vision reset and I saw that it was Bran, not his father, holding the door for me. My heart started again, but slowly. All told, this wasn’t much better. I might not get the shit beat of me today, but I was definitely speeding toward that day.

“Hey, Bran,” I said stiffly. Automatically I’d sped up to grab the door. Now momentum was carrying me through it. “I forget how much you look like your dad sometimes.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“What are you doing here?”

He looked at me, his blue eyes laughing. “I’ve got a thing for Layla’s roommate. What are *you* doing here?”

“Layla went home sick. I’m just checking up on her.”

Our footsteps echoed loudly on the uncarpeted steps. By mutual agreement, we’d both turned toward the stairwell rather than waiting for the dodgy looking elevator. Bran was ahead of me, and I thought I saw a ghost of a smirk on his face as he turned to go up the next flight. But all he said was, “Cool,” in a voice so indifferent I wondered if I’d imagined the smirk.

Thanks to Bran, I didn’t have to knock. The door was propped open on its deadbolt because they were clearly expecting him. He walked in and gestured for me to follow.

I’d never been inside Layla’s apartment. I’d only waited out front while she ran in to grab something. It was... fine. Not the kind of place I thought she should be leaving the door propped open, but it could be worse. It had style, even if I wasn’t impressed by the elevator or the security.

“Layla,” Bran called. “Your boss is here.”

Two voices came at once. An unfamiliar one that said, “I’m on a call!” and then Layla’s voice saying, “That’s not funny, Bran.”

“But you haven’t even heard the punchline yet,” he said, and gestured for me to come closer.

Gritting my teeth, I walked down the short hallway into the living room. There was a loveseat that sat empty and a long couch where Layla and another girl were.

The girl I’d never seen before was sitting at one end, a headset on her head. She glanced up at me, eyes wide, then looked back at her screen. Layla, who

had been laying on the last two cushions, bolted upright.

“Aiden!”

For a minute, I thought maybe I’d been wrong. She wasn’t pissed at me after all. But then color crept up her throat and thunderclouds gathered in her eyes. She was pissed all right. The only question now was how we were going to have this out without giving away our secret.

“Liv, I’m hungry,” Bran said casually as Layla’s roommate disconnected her call.

“You know where the—” Liv broke off suddenly, almost like she’d picked up on the charged silence between Layla and me. “Me too,” she redirected.

“Great. Let’s grab a bite somewhere.” Bran held out his arm, so effortlessly cool and adult that I suddenly felt even older than my forty-two years. It was one thing for Layla to be an adult, but when the hell had the younger ones grown up, too?

They made quick work of their exit. After the front door closed behind them, Layla stood up slowly from the couch. Her eyes were big and angry in her face. “You’re really playing fast and loose with this so-called secret,” she bit off.

“You weren’t answering my calls,” I countered. “What the hell was I supposed to do?” I looked over at the closed door. It was like Bran had known that we were about to argue. “Do they know?”

“Yes.”

I knew I didn’t have room to be angry, but I couldn’t help the frustrated oath that slipped out.

“Oh, don’t you dare.” Layla jabbed her fists into her hips. “Don’t you dare act like I’m the one being reckless with this secret when you took it upon yourself to assign me a babysitter for the charity ball and then told my dad about it. Would you do that for all your employees?”

“No, but I’m not in love with all my employees,” I snapped back before I even realized what I’d said.

Layla's eyes widened further. Then her brows crashed down again. "Don't try to get out of this fight by claiming you're in love with me, Aiden. That's the lowest thing you could do right now."

I ground my back teeth together. "I'm not trying to get out of anything, Layla. I'll fight with you all day about this. All night, too, though I'd rather be doing other things. Because I fucking love you."

Every time I said it, I felt her anger deflate a little. Then I felt it puff up all over again because she was so mad that I was making her forget that she was mad. It made me want to laugh, to shake her, to kiss her.

"I love you," I repeated, this time because it felt good. It felt right. Like I was finally telling a secret I'd kept in too long. "I'm in love with you, Layla. Do you love me?"

"I don't know," she snapped, still wanting to be angry.

I couldn't help it. I did laugh now. "You do." Risking her wrath further, I crossed the distance between us and caught her chin, angling it up so I could get the full effect of that lethal blue glare.

"Maybe, but I'm still furious."

"I get it. But listen—" I smoothed my hands into her hair and held her head. "New plan. I'm not sending Joe."

"Good."

"Because I'm going myself."

Layla hesitated, clearly seeing the benefits to the two of us getting out of town together. "Won't that look suspicious?"

"Maybe," I said slowly. "But maybe I don't care anymore." Because she hadn't taken her fists off her hips to sock me in the stomach yet, I lowered my mouth to hers.

Her lips yielded beneath mine reluctantly. The kiss was long, slow, and it felt like we were sealing an agreement with it. When she pulled back, her eyes were focused on mine.

“Maybe I don’t care either.”

CHAPTER 23

LAYLA



Aiden and I were still careful at work, but we let our guard down outside of it. We went to dinner together on the other side of town, and once in a while, he even spent the night at my place now that he knew that Liv and Bran were in on the secret.

Liv and Bran had their own secret they thought they were keeping, but Aiden and I were experts at this by now. We knew my brother didn't really crash on the couch at the end of a long night, and we heard him on those nights he pretended to leave and then doubled back.

It was nice to see my brother and my best friend falling for each other, even if it was kind of strange. I hoped that when he eventually found out about me and *his* best friend, my dad would feel similarly.

"Don't count on it," Aiden said when I mentioned it one night. We'd driven across town to eat at a restaurant we figured was far away enough that no one we knew would be there. We were doing that more and more. It was starting to feel normal to be out with him in public. It was the hiding that was beginning to feel strange. More and more, I wondered, *could we just tell him?*

"Why?" I twirled a hank of angel hair pasta around the tines of my fork and watched his face as he considered his response.

“Because he wants everything for you.”

“You’re everything.”

Our gazes locked.

“You’re everything, too,” he said quietly.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“He won’t see it that way.”

I didn’t argue. In many ways, Aiden knew my father better than I ever would. While Jack had been my dad for twenty-five years, he had been Aiden’s friend for longer. They’d grabbed a beer together once a month for as long as I could remember. If Aiden had had a big wedding with Shara, my dad would have been best man. Instead, they’d eloped, saving me from the excruciating task of watching him marry another woman.

“It’s enough for me,” I said, and then changed the subject. We spent too much time worrying about what other people would think. Worrying about not getting caught. I was looking forward to playing tourist with him in New York City. We would have to be discreet at the event, but other than that, we could be together. The separate rooms the travel manager had booked for us would be superfluous. I doubted I’d even go in mine once.

It was nice to have something to plan, too. It turned out, Aiden had never been a tourist in New York. He’d gone down a few times for a meeting and come right back to Boston. I convinced him that we should go down a day early and do some of the things he never had.

“I don’t know if I need to see a Broadway show,” he said mildly when I booked us one, but he didn’t argue. He seemed to like that I was planning our trip so meticulously.

“What do you want to see more?” I asked him while we were waiting for our dessert to arrive. “The Statue of Liberty or the One World Observatory.”

“Neither. I just want to see you in our hotel room. Preferably naked.”

I grinned. “You’ll get plenty of that, but we aren’t going all the way to New York and not doing some of the classic tourist things.”

Aiden smiled back, but his eyes were serious as he looked at me. “This is new to me.”

I tilted my head. He could have been talking about this trip to New York, but something in his voice told me it went deeper than that. “You’ve never taken a vacation?” I guessed.

“No, I have. But I’ve never had someone else plan one.”

A warm glow spread through me. I had the feeling it would be a long time before the things that mattered most to Aiden stopped surprising me. “This is nothing,” I said. “This is an extended work trip. I’ll plan a real vacation for us one day.” We clinked glasses, as if the cheers would seal the deal. Then I couldn’t help myself. I was curious. “Your parents never took you on a vacation?”

He didn’t talk a lot about them. I knew he was close with his mom though, because he’d bought her a house and I’d heard him talking to her on the phone now and then.

Aiden’s gaze became distant, the way it did when his dad came up. “No,” he said in an offhand way, as though it didn’t matter. “My dad drank up the vacation money. My mom worked three jobs just to keep a decent shirt on my back and a roof over my head.” His eyes came back to mine, blazing in a way that belied his casual tone. “She doesn’t have to work any of them anymore though.”

“I bet she would have planned great vacations for you,” I said quietly. I set down my glass of wine and reached over to squeeze his hand. He didn’t let mine go though, when I went to pull back. Instead, he rose in his seat and tugged me up, too. We kissed across the small bistro table. A warm, heady kiss that was sweeter than the dessert.

After we sat back down, I rearranged my napkin in my lap and said in my own carefully casual way, “Maybe one day I can plan a vacation for all three of us.”

Aiden shot me a grin. He looked almost normal again, though the fire was still simmering in his eyes. “Maybe,” he agreed. “I guess you two should meet before we fly off to the Bahamas together.”

“It’s only fair,” I agreed. “I mean, you do know *my* parents.” I held my breath until Aiden laughed. We were getting better, but the subject of my parentage was still loaded. “I do want you to meet my mom,” he said, sliding his credit card into the bill holder and pushing the last of the dessert closer to me. “It’s complicated though.”

“Because she knows Jack?” I guessed.

Aiden nodded. “She asks about him every time I see her. And she asks about you, too.”

“Me?”

“And your mom, and Bran, and baby Davis.”

I laughed at my youngest sibling’s nickname. Poor thing would always be Baby Davis to us, even when she had grandkids. I felt bad that I hadn’t spent more time with her since I’d come home, but I’d been so busy with work. And the boss, of course. “I’m glad she already has a good opinion of me,” I said.

“Yeah.” His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I hope she still has a good opinion of *me* when she finds out.”

His words landed like lead in my stomach. All this time, we’d been so concerned about how my parents would react—particularly my dad—that I hadn’t even thought about his mom. “You think she won’t like me?”

Aiden shook his head. “No, she’ll love you. But she’ll think I’m too old for you.” His tone was self-deprecating. “She won’t be wrong.”

“She won’t be right, either,” I said hotly. I was sick of thinking about what other people would think of Aiden and me. Plenty of women married men much older than themselves. And the trend was reversing, too. But as bad as it was worrying about other people, I hadn’t had to worry about what *Aiden* thought in a while. Now though, I wondered. “Does the age gap bother you?” I asked suddenly.

He shook his head. “I don’t think about it anymore.”

“Good, me either.”

“But other people will.” Aiden held up a hand, stemming the indignant flow of words he could see forming on the tip of my tongue. “And I don’t care about most other people. But my mom’s opinion—and your dad’s opinion—you can’t expect me not to care about them.”

I didn’t like it, but I knew he was right. I sighed, looking around at all the other couples. My gaze caught on the engagement ring of the woman at the next table. For the first time since Christian’s ill-fated proposal, I felt something other than embarrassment, guilt, and relief at the sight of a diamond. Instead, I felt a tug of longing. It wasn’t that I wanted Aiden to propose—well, maybe I did, but I wasn’t even ready to think about that yet—but I envied this woman’s ability to wear her commitment on her finger. I was committed to Aiden, body, heart, and soul, but no one could know.

“It’s strange,” I murmured, still looking at that ring. I slipped my foot between his. “Sometimes I think it’s fun, having you as my secret.”

Aiden’s eyes smoldered and he reached under the table to squeeze my calf. “I know what you mean.”

“But other times...” I pulled my foot back.

“I know what you mean there, too,” Aiden said quietly. “It won’t be like this forever, Layla. I love you. One day, everyone will know.”

“I love you, too.” Unwillingly, I thought of the scores of women who had fallen for the *I love you, but we have to keep this thing a secret for a little while, okay?* line. I’d always wondered how they could be so stupid. If a man had to hide you, he wasn’t really *yours*. But Aiden upended everything. Now I could easily see myself becoming one of those women.

But I thought he loved me.

I was so lost in the downward spiral of my thoughts that I nearly missed what he said next. “I’ll figure something out. Soon.”

And maybe it made me a fool, but I believed him.

I loved him too much not to.

CHAPTER 24

AIDEN



I had to tell Jack. I could tell the secrecy was beginning to gnaw at Layla. She was right—there was a point when it had been fun. Clandestine. Now I just wanted to be able to take her out to dinner on our side of town without fear of who we might run into. I wanted to think about our future together without the threat of Jack’s reaction overshadowing it.

The problem was, I didn’t know how. The other problem was, the person I normally would have asked for advice was Jack himself. Maureen was my back up, but I couldn’t go to her either. So that was why I found myself telling Carl, my mentee, about it.

I don’t know how it came up. It sure as hell wasn’t like he asked, *hey man, how’s your love life?*

Strangely, Carl listened. When I was done, he said, “That’s a real fucking pickle, rich man. What are you going to do about it?” His voice was its usual mixture of disdain and sarcasm, but I sensed that he was genuinely interested.

“Hell if I know,” I muttered. I was already regretting telling him. I was supposed to be his mentor, for fucks sake, and here I was telling him about how badly I was currently fucking up my own supposedly reformed life. By betraying the person who had been *my* mentor.

“I think you should get it over with,” Carl said frankly. He shoved a French fry in his mouth and stretched out his foot to admire his new shoes. He had kept up his end of our bargain and passed all his classes in the first quarter.

“So I can get my ass handed to me sooner?”

Carl snickered. “Yeah.” He ate another fry. “But seriously, it’s only going to get worse the longer you put it off, right? Isn’t that what you’d tell me?”

“That’s exactly what I’d tell you.” I ate a fry, too, but I barely tasted it. The thought of telling Jack turned everything to sawdust.

“And you said her brother knows?” Carl shook his head disapprovingly. “That’s a potential snitch, man. You want him to find out through someone *else*?”

“Bran isn’t a snitch,” I countered.

“Everyone’s a snitch, in the right circumstances.” Carl said darkly. Then almost as an afterthought, “Or maybe he’ll just slip up. Same end result. Your face turned into raw hamburger meat.”

For a kid wearing hundred-dollar shoes that I’d bought, he sounded entirely too gleeful at this possibility. Still, this was the most interest he’d shown in me *ever*. He was holding eye contact. He was offering good advice, even if it was loaded with joyful speculation about what Jack would do to me. I decided to keep going.

“Okay, but don’t I end up with raw hamburger for a face no matter what? Why shouldn’t I just put it off as long as possible?”

“Because then it’s going to look even worse when you get caught. And like *you told me*, you always get caught eventually.” Carl looked triumphant about turning my own argument back on me. I got a flash of him fifteen years from now. A grown man in a suit and bad ass shoes, standing in front of a courtroom. That vindictive gleam in his eyes almost polished away, but there if you looked close enough.

It was so clear, I felt disoriented when the image faded.

“What?” Carl paused, a French fry halfway to his mouth. His mouth turned

hard. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

I shook my head to clear it. “Kid, have you ever thought about going into law?”

“Like a cop?”

I shook my head. “No, like being a lawyer.”

His answering snort was so loud that our side of the food court turned to look at him. “No,” he said, all confidence. The same way I told Jack so confidently that nah, I wasn’t going into some namby pamby shit like *marketing*.

How had Jack convinced me to give it a shot?

“I think you’d be good at it.”

Another snort.

“I think you’d make a shit ton of money at it.”

Suddenly, Carl was interested.

Layla was still at the apartment when I got back. She’d made noise about going home to spend roommate time with Liv since we were going to New York this week, but I was glad she hadn’t followed through. More and more, I wanted her wherever I was. I’d never been the kind of guy that wanted to be together all the time, but that was changing. Carl was the one thing I wouldn’t cancel on to spend more time with her.

“I swear I was planning to leave,” she said when I walked in. She was curled up on the couch, a blanket pulled up to her shoulders because I kept the place too cold for her liking.

“I’m glad you didn’t.” I leaned over to kiss her. As I pulled away, I noticed how pale she was. “Are you feeling okay?”

Layla made a face and pushed her hand out of the blanket. She wiggled it then pulled it back in. “Fine. I don’t know. Weird.”

I sat down on the edge of the couch, eyebrows raised. “If you had to pick one...?”

Layla thought about it. “I don’t know. Right after you left, I thought that I was getting sick, and I was so mad about it because we have our trip this weekend. But then I had some toast, and I just felt tired.”

I moved my hand to her forehead. “You don’t feel hot.”

“I don’t,” she agreed. “I feel *meh*.”

I got the thermometer just in case, but I was right. Her temperature was normal.

“I should leave,” Layla sighed when the thermometer flashed green. “I told Liv I was coming home.”

“Or you could stay,” I countered. “And I’ll tell Liv you’re sick.”

“She’ll think it’s about the HBO.” Layla nodded toward the screen where she was flipping through one of the many streaming services Shara had signed us up for. I’d never bothered to cancel them after I inherited them in the divorce.

“I don’t care what she thinks.” I stood up and walked back into the kitchen to put the thermometer away. “I like you here.”

“Enough to keep the HBO?” Layla’s voice was muffled because she had the blanket pulled up to her chin, but I made it out anyway and laughed. I’d talked about canceling some of the services before, but it looked like I wouldn’t be canceling this one.

“Enough to keep the HBO. If that’s what it takes.” I brought her a bottle of ginger ale and set it on the coffee table.

Layla smiled her thanks, and a glint of mischief shone in her eyes as she looked up at me. “That’s not what it takes.”

“You want Starz and Netflix too?”

“All of it,” she laughed. “I noticed you even have Disney Plus.”

I winced. “That was Shara’s way of telling me she wanted kids *now*.”

Her name fell heavy in the space between us. Layla looked surprised I’d mentioned her. I hardly ever did. I never talked about why our marriage ended.

Layla struggled up so that she was sitting cross legged on the couch. I sat down next to her. She had some romantic comedy frozen on the screen. “And you didn’t?”

I shook my head slowly. “No. I thought I did, but when it came time to actually have the theoretical children, I don’t know. I fucked up.”

There was a wealth of sympathy in Layla’s blue eyes. I didn’t know if it was for Shara or for me. Maybe it was for both. She leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. “I’ll stay,” she said quietly.

I put my arm around her and held her close.

CHAPTER 25

LAYLA



I didn't know what was up with me, but I was determined not to let it ruin my first trip with Aiden. Maybe it was just an extended work trip where we would be up to our old tricks in a new city, but it was still our *first vacation*. Besides, whatever was going on with me wasn't like any cold or flu or food poisoning or allergic reaction I'd ever had. It was waves of nausea that struck at strange times, peaked violently after about half an hour, and left me tired but functional for the rest of the day. For the most part, I could hide it from Aiden. He was busy doing a week's worth of work in two and a half so we could leave for New York after work on Wednesday.

Because he was so busy, I was home more, and it was Liv who caught me dry heaving in the bathroom one afternoon.

"Whoa," she said, gingerly placing her hand on my back as if she were considering rubbing it. She changed her mind at a particularly violent retching sound that, as usual, produced nothing. Backing into the doorway, she said, "Um, I think you should go to the doctor."

I wiped at my lips and accepted the hand towel she offered. "If this keeps up, I'll go. *After New York.*"

"You're really looking forward to this aren't you?"

“Desperately.” Exhausted, I brushed past her and went back to the nest I’d made on the couch. Liv sat at the other end. I could tell by the look on her face that she wanted to talk, but all I wanted to do was zone out while reality TV droned on comfortingly in the background.

“Bran and I were wondering—how serious do you think this thing with Aiden is?”

I pushed down the blanket from where I had it tucked up to my nose and raised my head so I could stare at her. I didn’t like her careful tone. And I definitely didn’t like the idea that she and my little brother had been discussing my relationship behind my back. “Serious,” I said flatly. “Why?”

Liv tucked her foot under her butt and shifted uncomfortably. “Do you think he’s as serious about it as you are?” She saw the look on my face and hurried on. “We’re just worried. Aiden is a lot older than you, and it’s never a good sign when someone is keeping you a secret.”

“Oh no, kettle?”

She had the decency to blush rather than try to deny it. “That’s different. We’re feeling it out. We’re not sure if it’s serious or not. But you seem like you’re—” she hesitated, then finished lamely, “really serious about Aiden.”

“I am, and he’s serious about me.” I flopped back. I would have been more annoyed, but the nausea was crawling up my throat again. My mouth was starting to water. “He told me that he loves me,” I said thickly. “We’re just waiting for the right time to tell people.”

“It’s been months, Layla. How much longer are you planning to wait?”

Had it really been months? The time had flown by. “It’s complicated,” I muttered, swallowing hard. “My dad. The work situation.”

“I get it, but none of that is going to change, so are you two just going to hide it forever?”

“No, we’re just—ughhh.” I shoved the blanket off and made my way back to the bathroom where some predictably unproductive dry heaving rocked me from the pit of my stomach to the back of my burning throat. Tears squeezed out of my eyes, but I couldn’t seem to rid myself of what my body didn’t

want anymore.

Liv was there again with a hand towel and a cautious pat on the back. “We just love you, Layla. We don’t want to see you get hurt.”

I snatched the towel from her and buried my face in it. “I’m not going to get hurt,” I said into the thick fibers. “I’m *in love*.”

And Liv, to her credit, didn’t point out that the two aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive.

On Wednesday evening, I left the office before Aiden and drove straight to his place. I was relieved that I’d gotten my daily run in with nausea done around lunchtime. In his apartment, I made sure I’d thrown in the last few things I needed for the trip and then made myself a cup of coffee. I didn’t usually drink it past two or three in the afternoon, but lately, I could sleep at the drop of a hat. I’d been miserably tired in our last brand development meeting, and I was worried that Blake had taken my half-closed eyes as some sort of come on.

He wasn’t happy about Aiden coming to the charity ball, either. He tried to play it off, but we could tell that his joke about how surely Aiden had more important things to do wasn’t a joke at all. I’d never tell Aiden, but more and more, Blake was starting to give me the creeps. Even though I’d made it perfectly clear my only interest in him was professional, he still let his gaze linger too long on mine. I’d taken to wearing oversized cardigans to our meetings with him under the pretense that the conference room was cold. It was really so he couldn’t stare at my breasts while he pretended to think.

I drank my coffee and slowly felt some animation seep back into my limbs. They felt so heavy lately, like my body had one foot in the bed and it was just waiting for the rest of me to catch up. As I poured artificial energy into my body, my excitement about the trip sparked up again. By the time Aiden walked through the door, I was practically vibrating with it.

“We’re going on vacation!” I cried, jumping on him as soon as he walked through the door.

Aiden staggered back a step, and I could feel his chest vibrating with his laughter. “Not if you kill me, we aren’t.” He hoisted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, securing myself to him.

“I can’t wait. Let’s go now.”

He laughed again as he carried me forward and deposited me on the kitchen counter. “I can’t wait either but let me check my email one more time.” He pulled his laptop out and checked it right there on the counter. I drummed my heels impatiently into the cabinets until he shot me a quelling look. “You’re ruining my kitchen.”

“Then you’d better get me out of here,” I countered.

Aiden answered a few quick emails and then we were on our way. The drive was nearly five hours, but it went by so quickly that I was shocked when I saw the city skyline appear, framed in the windshield. “How did you get us here so fast?”

“If you call four and a half hours fast, I apologize for how disappointing our sex life must have been for you so far,” Aiden said, nodding toward the clock. He grinned when I socked him in the arm and reached over to squeeze my knee. “I’ll do better tonight.”

I put my hand on his and moved it up. There wasn’t a single thing about sex with Aiden I would change, but if he wanted to prove something, I was ready. This was our first vacation after all. “I bet the drive went by so quickly because I’m such a great DJ,” I teased him.

He made a face but didn’t argue. We’d taken turns playing each other our favorite songs and quickly realized that our musical tastes didn’t overlap at all. He liked pounding rock music and I liked soul singers. He considered a screaming chorus the hallmark of a good song, and I liked it if you could maybe understand the words.

“I hope our kids get my musical taste,” I said without thinking at one point in the drive.

Aiden hadn't said anything, and the silence morphed into something tense and terrible. I could have kicked myself for saying it. We'd said we loved each other, but we'd never really talked about the future. In my head, Liv's cautious voice was the soundtrack to that long silence.

Are you sure he's as serious as you are?

It's not a good sign if he keeps you a secret.

Then I'd let Aiden pick the next song, and his emo screamo choice drowned her out.

As we pulled up to the hotel and Aiden handed the keys over to the valet attendant, I refused to let that one moment dim my excitement. Here we were in the city that never slept, and Aiden had promised me a night I wouldn't forget.

I was going to take him up on it.

CHAPTER 26

AIDEN



The hotel room was probably nice. I'm not sure. I barely glanced at it as the porter who had carried our bags up tried to give us the ten-cent tour.

"The coffee machine is over here," he said, and seemed to be about to demonstrate how it worked.

"Got it." I pressed a twenty-dollar bill in his hand. Not so much a tip as a firm suggestion to leave. He took me up on it.

"What if I wanted to know how the coffee machine worked?" Layla teased, tilting her head and putting a finger to her mouth.

"If you want coffee, I'll figure it out." I walked toward her.

Her smile widened behind her finger. "I don't want coffee."

Normally, I liked to take my time with Layla, but over four hours in the car, so close but unable to really touch her, made me impatient. I walked her backward until she came up against the dressing table, then lowered my mouth to hers. As always, our connection ignited like wildfire, a fusion of emotions and desire that had been building for weeks. Our lips met, and time seemed to stand still as we surrendered to the intensity of the kiss. I could feel her heart pounding through the thin material of her shirt. I was sure she

could feel mine.

When we were alone like this, all the shackles on our relationship came off. It was just us—no friends, no workplace—just the raw, unbridled passion we were both tired of pretending didn't exist. My hands explored every inch of her body, her curves and contours, caressing her breasts, sliding over her hips, and tracing the outline of her ass.

I could feel her moans vibrating through her lips against mine, and she wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me tighter against her. With my tongue dancing inside her mouth, I felt her hands reach down and grip the bulge in my pants, massaging it with a gentle pressure that sent electric shocks throughout my body. I could feel the heat radiating from between her legs, and I knew she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

I gently slid my hand up her shirt, tracing her skin with my fingertips. I could feel the goosebumps rise along her arm as I moved higher until I reached her breast, gently squeezing it while my thumb brushed across her nipple, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through her body. She moaned into my mouth, and I felt her hands move to the front of my pants, fumbling for the zipper.

As I bent her over the dressing table, she quickly undid my belt and pulled my pants off, revealing my erect cock straining against my underwear. I could tell by her breathing that she was getting excited. I slowly traced the outline of her sex with my finger and slid it inside her. She gasped loudly, and I could feel her juices start to soak my fingers. I continued to slide my fingers in and out of her, and I could feel her muscles tighten around them. She was soaking wet, and I could tell that she was ready for me.

I removed my fingers and gently ran them over her clit, causing her to let out a loud moan. She grabbed my cock and guided it to her opening. Slowly, I pushed myself into her, and she let out a sound of pure ecstasy. I slowly slid my cock in and out of her, enjoying the sensation of her tight channel gripping me.

After a minute or two, I started to pick up speed, thrusting harder and faster, and she began to moan louder and louder. I turned her around, and she leaned against the mirror, supporting herself on her elbows. I placed my hands on

her hips and started to pump my length into her, fucking her harder and deeper.

I cupped her breast from behind, pinching her nipple and rubbing her clit at the same time. Her moans became more frequent, and her body started to shake. She was close to coming, and I picked up the pace even more, pounding into her. I could feel her orgasm approaching.

Her gaze met mine in the mirror. Wild and unfocused. Her lips were forming my name over and over, unable to give sound to the syllables. I saw the moment she came. Her eyes went blank, her mouth opened in a wide O. Then her head fell forward, hanging from the frame of her shoulders.

Moments later, I exploded deep inside her with one final thrust. We both collapsed onto the floor, spent and exhausted.

“So,” Layla said moments later, rolling into me. “About that coffee.”

CHAPTER 27

LAYLA



I woke up in the night, the nausea working its way up from my toes to my throat. Not wanting to wake Aiden, I transferred my weight from the mattress to the floor in painfully slow increments, then tiptoed to the bathroom. The cool marble tiles felt delicious as I sank down onto them, like they were pulling whatever this was out of my body through my pores. And then the nausea regrouped and surged its way up from my abdomen to my throat.

Half an hour later, when it had finally subsided, I splashed water on my face and made my way back to bed. I could tell by Aiden's deep, even breathing that he hadn't been disturbed by my exit from our bed. I was glad, but I was also disappointed. My heart was beating triple time, and I wanted to slide up against him and feel his strong arm curl around me.

Are you sure he's as serious as you are?

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly and willed Liv to get out of my head. In just a few hours, it would be morning, and I had the perfect day planned for us. I wasn't going to let anything—or anyone—get in the way of that.

The rest of the night was uneventful, and I woke up to the smell of coffee. I opened my eyes to see Aiden standing at the small kitchenette across the room, fiddling with the small paper cups. He'd made me a cup, and I was glad to feel my stomach stay in one place as he carried it over.

"Good morning," he said with that irresistible grin that was half a smirk.

"Very good," I murmured, taking the paper cup from him and cradling it between my palms. The heat felt good. It seemed like I was always on the chilled side lately. I watched him as I blew across the steaming brown surface. He did look so good, and I still had the exquisite ache between my thighs of our night together.

Aiden carried his cup over and got back in bed beside me, careful not to disrupt my equilibrium. "So what's first on the agenda?" he teased. "I have to log in and send a few e-mails, but then I'm all yours."

I liked that idea. I got up and showered while he worked, pushing away the worry that was beginning to nag at me. I had been working hard lately, and the stress of that combined with the psychic toll of keeping Aiden a secret from my family was probably wearing on me. I didn't *feel* stressed because I was too happy about the work I was doing and what was blooming between Aiden and me, but I must be internalizing it came out as nausea and fatigue.

Rationalization and the pounding shower spray washed away my worries, and by the time I stepped out and wrapped myself in one of the oversized towels, I was ready to forget about it. After all, I hadn't scheduled time to stress about something that was probably nothing into our day.

And it was a great day. We went to breakfast first where we got better cups of coffee and then tackled the city. Because Aiden had never been, I wanted to show him everything. I dragged him from one end of Manhattan to the other.

"This is like an overview of the city," I explained to him. "We'll have to come back and do deep dives into the different parts. Like the Metropolitan Museum of Art would basically take us all day, so we're not going in."

Aiden wrapped his arm around my waist. "Just say the word and we'll come back."

"Christmas," I said. "I've always wanted to come and see the Rockettes and

the window displays and the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree.” I leaned my head on his shoulder, excitement filling me. I hadn’t had a nice cold Christmas in years. I’d stayed in California with Christian for the last three, and LA tended to stay disappointingly balmy. I waited, expecting Aiden to agree, but he was checking his work email on his phone. I wasn’t even sure he’d heard me.

“Maybe we can tell my family by then,” I said.

“Maybe,” he muttered absently.

I pushed away my disappointment at his lackluster tone. I wasn’t going to let anything get me down this weekend. Not this weird nausea, not the ghost of Liv’s cautioning voice in my head, and not the prospect of spending three to four hours in close company with Blake tomorrow evening.

The day was magical, capped off by a Broadway show—Aiden’s first.

“Wasn’t it amazing?” I demanded as we left. He had been skeptical about the musical I’d chosen.

“Spectacular,” he said without a hint of irony. “Art on that level is the kind of thing that kids who grow up in my old neighborhood miss out on.”

I knew he was thinking about Carl when he said it, though he hardly ever brought him up. I wished he would. The fact that he spent almost every Saturday morning with Carl made me hopeful that maybe, despite what had happened with Shara, he *did* want to be a dad.

The next day wasn’t ours to enjoy. Blake thought since we were all together in New York, we should have a meeting. He wanted to complain about how Gloria’s guidance on how to raise his social media views was inhibiting his creativity.

“But that’s the thing,” Gloria had griped to me before we left. “They’re *not* creative, and he can’t keep relying on the same schtick of hot man with cute cats. Views are dropping because people are getting bored.”

To his credit, Aiden was as diplomatic as I’d ever seen him. I knew he couldn’t stand Blake, but he managed to keep the emotion from vibrating off him like I’d seen it do in the past. It helped that, for once, Blake seemed more

concerned about his brand than looking down my shirt. Maybe because I'd worn one that crept right up to my collar bone and then bagged out until I tucked it into the waistband of my jeans.

Aiden had laughed when I put it on. "That won't stop him."

But it seemed like it had. I left our unnecessarily long meeting feeling very smug.

"Told you so," I couldn't help taunting Aiden. "He can't ogle what he can't see."

"You were right," he admitted.

"Of course I am. He's the out-of-sight, out-of-mind type."

"Wait until he sees what you're wearing tonight though."

If I had been picking my dress for the charity ball with Blake in mind, I'd have picked one of those oversized kaftan dresses in a jewel tone. But I'd picked it with Aiden's gaze in mind, so it skimmed my body in black satin.

"Guess you'll have to stay close," I said, slipping my hand into his.

He squeezed. "You can count on it."

CHAPTER 28

AIDEN



I watched Layla get ready, even though she kept making faces at me in the mirror and telling me to go watch TV or something. I couldn't help it. She was always beautiful, but as she did her hair and makeup and slid into the dress that fit her like a second skin, she transformed into something ethereally sexy.

"Ethereally sexy," she repeated with a laugh when I told her so. "I don't think those two words were meant to go together."

"Lots of things aren't *supposed* to go together." I wrapped my arms around her. "But sometimes they work anyway, right?"

Her smile softened. "Right."

I wanted to tell her then that I'd heard everything she said earlier—about coming back at Christmas, about telling her family. I hadn't said anything because the prospect of telling Jack twisted my guts out of shape, but we were on the same page. More and more, being unable to tell the world that I was in love with Layla Davis felt worse than what I imagined Jack's reaction would be.

"I love you," I murmured instead, mindful of the time.

Her eyes bright, she kissed me hard, and I felt the combination of passion and excitement I associated with being with Layla rise in me. There were other things I wanted to tell her, too. I wanted to talk about the future beyond Christmas. About moving in together. About kids. But again, time was in the way.

I'd do it after the ball. Maybe tomorrow when we woke up together since it always felt so right to start the day with her by my side.

When we got to the fancy hotel that Blake's patron owned, I felt my mood begin to slide downward. Blake was there, waiting in the lobby for us, but it was only Layla he looked at. I didn't blame him for that—almost every man had snuck a second look at her. What I blamed him for was the way he insinuated himself between us, and nothing I did could dislodge him. For someone who came off so obtuse, he was suddenly a masterful conversationalist. He spun webs of people around us, and almost before I knew it, I was locked into conversation with a potential client, and he was escorting Layla away.

I was making connections that could keep the lights on at Cross Media for years to come, but I hated every second. I could tell Layla was uncomfortable, but every time I managed to get between her and Blake, he spun another web that bound me to a shop talk conversation and left her to him.

Layla shot me a few looks throughout that told me she was fine and that I needed to relax. Looks that told me she knew what Blake was doing too, and who would have thought he'd be so good at it? I noticed she stuck to club soda instead of her usual preference of wine, and I knew that despite her silent assurance, Blake was unnerving her. This Blake *was* unnerving. The man I'd gotten to know in our brand development meetings was irritating, but this person was altogether different. Predatorily charming. His teeth gleamed like pearls; his eyes were sharp as scythes. I wanted to get Layla out of there, as far away from him as I could get, but I couldn't.

We had a job to do.

Keeping Layla in my periphery, I glanced around the room. I'd told Maureen that the reason I wanted to chaperone Layla myself rather than sending Joe

was that a client we wanted to catch was here. Holly Bernstein had cultivated a following on Tik Tok by going through her great grandmother's recipe book one by one. She was grave and funny, and we could easily see her making the leap to television.

I spotted her all the way across the ballroom, of course, like she too wanted to keep her distance from Blake. She was surrounded by people, and I felt the ever-present band of tension in my stomach tighten. I thought I recognized Meagan Kinney, CEO of an up-and-coming brand development firm herself.

I wanted to make a beeline for Holly now, but Layla was wrapped up in a conversation with Blake and two other people. I was less and less interested in keeping Blake happy, but we were at an industry party. I couldn't very well pull my girlfriend away from him. But I couldn't leave without making an effort with Holly Bernstein either.

If I didn't at least get an interest call with her, Maureen would know I hadn't tried that hard. And if Maureen knew I hadn't tried that hard, she would wonder why I'd had to be the one to go to New York.

And then she might figure everything out before I was ready.

CHAPTER 29

LAYLA



If I hadn't felt Blake's eyes on me like leeches, I would have been impressed by the event. The ballroom was beautifully appointed with gilt and crystal chandeliers, plush velvet settees, and a dance floor that gleamed under the biggest chandelier of all, the one suspended just in front of the stage by swooping, glittering ligatures. A string quartet was playing a mix of classical and pop.

I wanted to just dance with Aiden and forget why we were here, but that wasn't an option. It seemed that just standing beside him, taking on the brunt of the shop talk together, wasn't even an option. Somehow, he always ended up embedded in conversation with someone else. And increasingly, I ended up in conversation with Blake.

And only Blake.

"Let's dance," he urged.

I laughed awkwardly, stalling for time. The first time he asked, I'd made the excuse that no one else was dancing. That had changed though. Seven or eight couples were moving across the floor in time to Sia's "Chandelier." "I don't know," I responded now. "I'm supposed to be working, right?"

Blake shot me a grin that I'm sure would have been considered devastating to

anyone else. To me, though, it felt like a steel trap. His teeth gleamed like pointed barbs. “I do my best work on the dance floor,” he said quietly.

I felt beads of sweat forming at my hairline. I wanted to look around and find Aiden, but I didn’t want him to think I needed him. I’d told him enough times I could handle Blake; I wasn’t going to look weak now.

“One dance,” I allowed. “And then you said you’d introduce me to Holly Bernstein.”

Holly Bernstein was another rising YouTube star that Maureen had specifically instructed me to connect with at this event if I could. I knew she was here because I’d seen her come in, but I hadn’t been able to break away from Blake long enough to introduce myself. I could tell that Aiden was feeling similarly thwarted. There seemed to be no shortage of people monopolizing his attention.

Even with the tall, intense man with slashing black brows standing too close to him though, Aiden saw Blake lead me out onto the dance floor. I shot him a reassuring smile. *It’s fine. No big deal. I’ve got this.* He wasn’t reassured though. I felt his gaze on me as Blake walked us to the very center of the dance floor and put his hand on my lower back, drawing me into him.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. The glamorous setting with its gleaming beauty suddenly felt like a trap. As Blake began spinning me around, every glint gilt made me think of bars on a cage. I’d never liked small spaces, and I hated being trapped in them even more. Though this room was nearly as large as a football field and the ceiling rose to cathedral heights, Blake made it feel small. Or maybe he made *me* feel small. Either way, it was a discomfort I had never experienced before. I couldn’t see any of the typical danger signs, but they were there all the same. They were just hidden by velvet draperies and thousand-dollar champagne.

“Do you like this?” Blake asked, but he didn’t say it like a question. In his oiled smooth tones, it came out like a statement of fact. *You like this.*

“It’s impressive,” I said honestly. It *was*, but the impression that it was making on me was the opposite of what he clearly thought.

Blake grinned, and I had the wild idea that his teeth weren’t really in his

gums, that he was gnashing on pearls. That he was a monster that ate beautiful things. It was feral and fanciful and absolutely nothing like me. I wasn't given to fits of imagination.

But Blake was suddenly defying all my logical boundaries. What else could explain how he went from an innocuous, irritating lech to seemingly dangerous? It didn't make sense. We were in a crowded room. Aiden's gaze was still wrapped around us, narrow and dangerous in its own right. There was nothing to be unnerved about.

I blinked and reset Blake in my vision. There he was, just a blandly handsome man who couldn't take a hint. Maybe it was time I stopped hinting.

"I have a boyfriend," I said bluntly, apropos of absolutely nothing.

"Of course you do," Blake agreed. "Look at you."

I tried not to be thrown by his cavalier reaction. I wasn't going to question whether I'd misread his intentions. I *knew* he'd flirted with the line between appropriate and inappropriate. Even now, his hand was on the very base of my spine. Another millimeter and I'd have cause to yank away, indignant.

Who would have thought a millimeter could be so big?

"It's serious," I said. "We're in love."

"Lucky guy." Blake spun me around, a move that required him to move his hand. "Is there a reason you're telling me this, Layla?" he asked when I came back to the cage of his arms.

"I just thought you should know."

"Now I know."

We danced out the rest of the song in a strange, mute communication. I was wondering what the hell was going on in his head as he continued to smile down at me, gray eyes revealing nothing of his intentions. If I were even the slightest bit less sure of myself, I'd think I'd made it all up. He was a consummate flirt. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it.

But I *was* sure. There was just a shadow of amusement that told me he was playing a game. Maybe he always had been. Maybe this was who he really

was, and the vain, cocksure character from before was just that... a character.

As the music ended, Blake stepped back immediately. I breathed my first full breath. I had been sure he'd let his hands linger and press me into another dance. Maybe he hadn't been so indifferent to my news about having a serious boyfriend after all. I turned automatically to look for Aiden, but to my surprise, I didn't see him.

"It looks like they started without us," Blake said.

I looked back at him, bewildered. Started *what* without us? The ball was in full swing, and the auction portion of it hadn't yet begun. What else was there that we could have missed?

"The introduction to Holly," he explained. "Come on, I think I know where they went."

Before I could respond, he was striding off the dance floor, through the glittering prisms of refracted light coming off the cut glass crystals hanging above. Unsure of what else to do, I followed him. I wished I had my phone, but I left it in the room to avoid having to carry a purse. I didn't think I'd need it. Now I had no way to call Aiden and ask where he'd gone.

Blake took us out of one of the tall double doors that led into an equally luxuriously appointed hallway. He looked up one way and then down the other.

"Why would they have left the ballroom?" I asked, standing on the threshold.

"Holly isn't going to want people reporting back to her current brand management guy that she's talking to some jerkoff in Boston, is she?" Blake sounded so logical, so impatient, that I took a step forward before I thought better of it. "I know where they'll be."

Now that I was out of the ballroom, it was like a protection spell had been broken. He reached out and laced his fingers through mine. Again, I thought of a bear trap. His grip on my hand was hard, his fingertips digging into the delicate bones like spokes. Again, that irrational fear spiked in me.

I'd told Aiden I'd handled guys just like Blake, guys worse than Blake.

But had I underestimated him?

Blake began walking, pulling me along with him. The nerves that had danced in my stomach all day suddenly began doing a different dance. A familiar one. The tension was thickening into nausea. I felt the saliva building in the back of my throat. I worried, irrationally, that it would keep me from screaming if I needed to.

“Come on, don’t you want to meet her?” Blake asked, looking over his shoulder at me. Our hands were connected by the full length of our arms, that’s how far ahead he was. How far I was lagging behind. Anyone else would have slowed down for me, but he seemed ruthlessly committed to his pace. I stumbled.

“Blake, slow down.” I tried to shake his hand off, but it was futile. The metaphor of the bear trap clamping closed was becoming reality. I tried to dig my heels into the carpet, but the smooth soles wouldn’t let me. These were shoes for dancing with Aiden in, not thwarting Blake. I looked for anything to grab onto with my free hand, but there were no doorknobs, no columns, no extraordinarily heavy looking statues to anchor myself too. And with every unwilling step I took, the nausea climbed higher.

“Blake, I’m going to be sick.” The words came out muddled and slurred. The nausea was thick as a milkshake in my throat.

He took a sudden turn, and we were in a much smaller room. It must have been just beyond the ballroom because I could still hear the music and noise of the bigger room through the wall. It was strange to be so close to it, and yet so far away. The room we were in was eerily quiet, save for the ghostly sounds of the party coming through the wall. It was dark, too. I didn’t realize how dark until Blake shut the door.

“Blake, what the hell are you doing? Where are Holly and Aiden?” Up until now, I’d hoped that we were really going to them. That Blake’s strange behavior wasn’t what I thought. Now I knew better. He was exactly the man we thought he was. Maybe worse. My polite restraint fell away like unlocked cuffs. I straightened to my full height, furious and sick. Both seemed to feed off each other.

When Blake came toward me, his crisp white shirt and white teeth gleaming

in the dark, I put out both hands and shoved him back, hard.

“Hey, hey,” he said soothingly. It made my skin crawl to hear him comfort me like he comforted one of his skittish cats. “It’s okay. No one is going to find us in here.” He reached for me again, so sure that that was what I wanted. I was astounded. How could he misread my signals when they were so clear?

“Blake, I am in a relationship,” I snapped. “I told you that. And he’s *here*.”

“Aiden Cross.” He sounded almost bored. “I know. That’s why I brought us in here. I had my brother distract him so we could get away.”

I pictured the dark-haired man who had stood so close to Aiden. Blake’s brother? They were as different as night and day, but now that I thought about it, I could see the similarities. Blake took another step forward. His hands were on my waist before I could take a step back.

“You did want to get away with me, right?” Again, his voice was coaxing, like he was talking to one of his animals.

“No.” I forced my arms between us as he tried to pull me to his chest. “That’s the last thing I want.”

He chuckled patronizingly. “Then why did you come?”

“Because I wanted to find more opportunities for you! I wanted to learn!” Furious at the position he’d put me in, I shoved outward. Blake didn’t move an inch. He was too close and too strong.

He was whispering something in my ear now, but I couldn’t hear him over the pounding of my own heart. The roar in my ears. “Blake, I’m going to throw up,” I said suddenly.

“You don’t have to be nervous.”

“Blake, I am really going to be sick,” I said more loudly. Somehow, I managed to force him back a step. I leaned my head forward, feeling the illness surge through me.

“You’re not really going to—”

And then I did.

CHAPTER 30

AIDEN



This asshole Stanton had managed to convince me to take my eyes off Layla. I knew I should have stayed right where I was until she was off that dance floor and away from Blake Morten, but like an idiot, I thought, *we're in a crowded room. What can he do?*

I stepped into the private back room reserved for the VIPs to meet Holly Bernstein—and when I came out two minutes later, Layla was gone.

“Relax,” Stanton said as I began searching the room for her. “I’m sure she’s in the bathroom.”

If I could have found Blake, I might have relaxed. If I’d spotted him ingratiating himself with some up-and-coming producers or talking to the Netflix executive, I could have believed Layla had just gone to the bathroom. But I circled the ballroom twice, bisecting it multiple times, and neither of them were anywhere to be seen.

Stanton had disappeared during my search, but I didn’t bother trying to find him. If he knew where Blake and Layla had gone, he wasn’t going to tell me.

Instinct propelled me out of the ballroom. Out in the hall, I had two choices. I could turn and go toward the lobby. If Blake had wanted to take Layla up to his room, that’s the way they would have gone. I started to turn that way, but

something stopped me. Blake must have known that Stanton wasn't going to be able to detain me for long. And I doubted that Layla was going with him docile as a lamb.

I turned on my heel and went the other way. I eyed a long, thin mark that turned the nap of the carpet a darker shade of royal blue than the rest. Had that come from a dragged heel? I increased my pace. If he'd taken her this way, he had limited options.

I stopped outside the first door I came to. I could tell from the dark line beneath the door that the lights were off inside. I hesitated. Had I lost my mind? *Was she in the bathroom?*

Then I heard her voice from within, faint and angry. "I'm going to be sick."

I shoved the door open just in time to see Blake throw himself backward. I could tell by where Layla was standing, nearly doubled over, that he'd been far too close to her. Both of their faces turned toward me, their eyes squinting against the bright light streaming in from the hallway.

"Aiden!" Layla said, relieved.

"For fucks sake!" Blake yelled. He was doing what almost looked like a strange dance. Turning one foot in and dragging it on the carpet and then the other. "You got that shit all over me!"

"I guess you shouldn't have tried to force yourself on me," Layla yelled, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand.

Blake sputtered, outraged. "You wanted it."

I didn't wait for Layla to respond. In two steps, I was on top of Blake. I had his collar in my fist, and my arm cocked back. "You son of a bitch," I swore. I couldn't see his smarmy face through the red haze in front of my eyes, but I knew he wasn't smiling anymore.

"Don't hit him, Aiden," Layla screamed.

"Don't you fucking dare," Blake yelled, his voice strangled from the tight grip I had on his collar. "I'll sue your ass."

I knew he would, too. And considering his face was part of his fucking brand,

he could probably sue for damages. I could lose everything I'd built. Hell, even if he didn't sue, I could lose everything. Who was going to hire a marketing team that had a history of punching their clients?

It almost killed me, but I slowly unclenched my fingers. Blake stumbled back, trying to hide the fact he was gasping for air. "That's... right," he got out. "And for the record," ragged inhale, "she's lying. She wanted—"

My knuckles were through the delicate bone of his nose before he could finish his sentence. The crunch was horrible and satisfying. The feral scream that ripped from his throat even more so. I drew back my arm, ready to do it again, but he was already on the ground. All that brawn, and he couldn't take a single punch. I let my arm relax and shook my head, disgusted.

"Aiden," Layla breathed, horrified.

"He had it coming," I said grimly. In the dark, I couldn't see how bad the damage was, but the white of his shirt was rapidly being overtaken by a dark, spreading stain. I could hear wet, ragged breathing and then, very low, words that sounded like they were flecked with spit.

"You'll regret that."

Instantly, my elbow was back, but before I could turn his eye the color of his tuxedo jacket, there was a sound at the door, and then a wedge of light fell across us.

Optics were my job, and I knew instantly how bad these optics were. There was Blake, huddled on the ground. Layla, both hands slapped over her mouth, eyes wide and face deadly white. Me with my arm cocked, my face twisted with rage, a growl caught in my throat.

And what was worse was that it wasn't just a couple at the door, looking for a private place to hide. It was the security guard from the front lobby flanked by the manager of the hotel, and behind him, about half a dozen curious spectators. More were crowding in behind them, even as hotel employees tried to direct them back to the ballroom. Before I could untwist my face or drop my arm, the first flashbulb popped.

"He assaulted me," Blake said immediately.

I had to give him credit, he knew the best thing he could do now was control the narrative. The security guard stepped in. I immediately relaxed back into a neutral position, but I could still feel the snarl distorting my mouth. I felt like a lion that had been interrupted in the middle of a kill. My body knew it was time to retreat, but my teeth were still bared and my blood was still singing.

“He attacked *me!*” Layla cried in my defense. Unfortunately, there were two *hes* in this situation, and one of them looked as defenseless as a rabbit with his ass on the floor and his legs akimbo. The security guard grabbed my arm.

“No, not *him,*” Layla said, realizing her mistake. “Blake Morten!”

The hotel’s management had managed to wrestle the professional photographer away, but I saw more than one phone pointed at us from the crowd that had gathered. Maybe there wouldn’t be professional pictures sold to TMZ, but there would be plenty of amateur footage to give this story life.

I weighed my options in a millisecond. If I resisted being detained, the story would be even bigger. I had to go quietly. My reputation was about to be mud either way, but maybe—just maybe—it would recover once the truth came out. I just couldn’t do anything between now and then to make people wonder if I was as violent and unhinged as Blake was about to start telling everyone.

“Layla, I need you to call Jack,” I said quietly, looking down. I didn’t know what my face looked like right now, but I wanted to mitigate the number of wild-eyed photos that people caught.

“Why?”

“Call him,” I repeated. I couldn’t handle the idea of this hitting the news and Jack finding out through someone else. I assumed I was about to be arrested, and I’d use my one phone call on him, but I didn’t know how long it would take to get processed. I *did* know how quickly a story could spread though, and this one had all the makings of a forest fire. Blake wasn’t A list, not by a long shot, but he was relatively famous. Worse, he had a good reputation. And while I wasn’t anywhere near famous, I was known in my field. And then there was Layla. Young, beautiful Layla.

It made me sick to think about what I’d just dragged her into. Her reputation

would forever be tinged with this scandal. Anyone who looked her up would see this sordid story, however it played out. We'd been so cautious, not wanting to change how people at the office viewed her. Now the whole world would be looking at her, wondering, speculating.

I never should have touched her.

CHAPTER 31

LAYLA



The conversation with my father was strange and distorted in my memory.

“He’s *where*?”

“He did *what*?”

“Where is this Blake Morten mother fucker now?”

My dad was usually mild-mannered, but his Irish side came out swinging when his family was threatened.

“He’s... I don’t know. I think they took his statement and let him go.”

“They let the asshole who assaulted you go and they arrested *Aiden*?”

I don’t remember how I answered the questions. At one point, my mom took over, and I heard the sounds of my dad furiously packing his overnight bag. Her voice was soft and soothing, but I couldn’t remember a thing she’d said after we got off the phone. Except that they were both coming.

I went back to the hotel room in a state of shock. I couldn’t believe that just a few hours ago, Aiden had sat on that bed and watched me get dressed. I was so sure when we left this room that when we came back, he would help me get undressed. Now I twisted my arm behind my back and pulled the zipper

down myself. I'd brought cute, slinky nightclothes. The kind that were designed to be taken off rather than sleeping in. Despairingly, I pulled on Aiden's sweatpants and t-shirt instead, which looked utterly ridiculous on me.

The smell of his cologne, the sharp notes stitched into the cotton, at first brought a giant wave of comfort. Then, when my body realized it was just the ghost of him, aching sadness took its place. I should have gone to the station with him but he was so adamant that I not.

"Don't make this any more interesting for them." He'd bit off the word underneath his breath, somehow looking both savage and resigned.

Trembling set in. Fine tremors that came one after another until I crawled in bed and squeezed my knees to my chest, trying to get them to stop. I must have stayed like that for hours because I was still holding my knees when my parents called. They were in the hotel lobby. What was my room number? The one Maureen had given them must be wrong because no one was answering the door.

Numbly, I gave them the right one. It was only when I heard the heavy fall of my dad's fist on the door that I realized that, like it or not, they were about to get another big shock. I walked to the door, my ears ringing. I felt like I was triple wrapped in cotton wool. My dimensions were off and everything was muffled. When my mom threw her arms around me, the comfort felt far off and distant. When my dad looked me up and down and said, "What the hell are you wearing?" in a voice that told me he knew exactly what I was wearing, my nerves stayed frozen solid. Not a twitch.

"I'm wearing Aiden's clothes," I said in a strange, numb voice that didn't sound like me.

My mom was silently looking around, taking in the scene. My dress on the floor. Aiden's suitcase on the luggage rack. Two toothbrushes in the holder. There was no mistaking what was happening here.

"Oh," she said, her voice quiet and startled.

My dad was deadly silent. With every clue his eyes landed on, the red stain of his skin darkened. By the time his eyes returned to me, his face was a mottled

puce. But all he said was, “Are you okay, baby?”

“I’m—” I looked up at the ceiling, tears crowding my vision. I didn’t know how I felt. I’d been manhandled by a client. I’d gotten sick. I’d watched Aiden be led off with his hands bracketed behind him like a criminal when his only crime was defending me. And now, in the dead middle of the night, I was watching my dad find out that I was having an affair with his best friend.

It was a lot.

“I’m okay,” I managed. “I just—I want to see Aiden. I want to know that he’s okay.”

If this had been a cartoon, steam would have come out of my dad’s ears. Since there was nothing funny about this situation, he only nodded stiffly and said, “Wait here. I’ll see what I can do.”

My mom waited with me. She didn’t ask a single question, just pulled a chair up beside the bed and watched some episode of some season of some version of *Real Housewives*, our hands loosely entwined on the edge of the bed. I knew it had to be hard for her. Even through the cotton wool, I felt sorry for that. This wasn’t how I ever planned for them to find out. Aiden and I were supposed to tell them together. We were supposed to rehearse it. We were supposed to look and sound like exactly what we were—two consenting adults who were in love with each other. Sure, the circumstances were unusual, but it wasn’t *that* strange.

This was strange though. I felt the strangeness of it with every silent moment that passed. I felt like a child swimming in grown up’s clothing. Aiden was in jail. My parents had found out in the most sordid way possible. And God, would this nausea ever leave me *alone*?

“Mom,” I said suddenly, sometime around dawn. “I’m going to be sick.”

I barely made it past her to the toilet.

My mom followed me in, patting me gently on the back as she passed. I heard her turn on the sink, and a few moments later, she applied a cool wet washcloth to the back of my neck. It dripped down, pattering on the tile floor. I made a pillow of my arms on the toilet seat and laid my head down on them, so miserable I wanted to cry again. The cotton was slowly unwrapping

itself, and the heavy emotions of the night were seeping through.

“Honey,” my mom whispered, kneeling down beside me. Her gray eyes were full of an emotion I couldn’t put a name to. Worry, empathy, kindness, a mixture of all three. “Honey, have you been getting sick like this a lot?”

I nodded into my arms.

“Has it been in the morning mostly?”

I shook my head. The sickness was indiscriminate. It could hit anytime. Why would she—*oh*. My head shot up so fast I almost knocked into hers. “I’m not pregnant.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m—I *can’t* be pregnant. We’re always careful.”

She didn’t say anything, but her face said clearly, *but were you?*

And, unwillingly, my mind forced me to answer honestly. Yes, I was on birth control, but I didn’t take the pill at the exact same time every morning. And there had definitely been mornings I forgot about it altogether and took it that evening. I closed my eyes and tried to remember when I’d last had my period, but my memory was a humming blank. I couldn’t remember a single time that Aiden and I had been thwarted by that time of the month.

I made a sound somewhere between a whimper and a moan. Instantly, my mom was on her knees beside me. She pulled me away from the toilet basin and wrapped her arms around me. I sank into her embrace.

“I don’t even think he wants kids,” I groaned. I thought about what had happened with Shara. The Disney Plus subscription. My joke about kids that fell flat.

“It’ll be okay,” she whispered into my hair.

I tried to believe her.

CHAPTER 32

AIDEN



The next week passed in a hellish blur. It was a series of worst-case scenarios, all linked together on one endless chain of torment.

First, Jack bailing me out of jail, his jaw set and his eyes burning. I knew without having to ask that he knew. He didn't say a damn thing about it though. He just nodded tersely at me as I walked toward him, holding the envelope they'd sealed my phone and wallet into. Then he turned on his heel, pushed through the precinct's front door, and was gone by the time I got out to the sidewalk.

I took a cab back to the hotel and wasn't surprised to find that Layla had completely erased herself from the hotel room. There wasn't a spare earring back to prove she'd ever been there. I looked around and felt the pit in my stomach deepen.

The next link on the chain was the story that broke by that afternoon. It was centered around Blake, which made sense because he was the one with the most name recognition. What blew my fucking mind though was how sympathetically he was portrayed. I hadn't been defending my girlfriend from him when he dragged her into an empty room, I'd *attacked* him when I found them alone together. I guess it worked with the puzzle pieces I gave them. In addition to the snarl on my face that the cameras caught when my arm was

cocked back and my eyes were squinted against the sudden influx of light, I'd also given them a priceless mugshot. In it, I don't look like any version of myself I've seen in the mirror lately. I look like my teenage self. A sullen scowl, dazed eyes, an expression carved from granite.

My mom called because of course the neighborhood gossips had gotten wind of it and reported the news to her immediately. I had to reassure her that it was a misunderstanding, that I wasn't going back to my old ways. I'd never do that. Look at what I'd built. Look at who I was now. I was *different*.

Until I wasn't.

Maureen called, too. She wanted to know exactly what had happened, and I told her. I told her everything.

"This is a real cluster," she said.

"I know."

"You beat up a client."

"He deserved it."

"You're fucking an employee."

I couldn't let that one slide. "I'm *in love with* an employee."

"Yeah, that old story doesn't play these days. When it's a CEO and a junior associate, it's scandalous, not romantic."

"I'm in love with her, Maureen," I repeated.

She blew out her breath noisily, making a whooshing noise down the line. "You'd better hope she feels the same way because you just handed her a lot of leverage."

"She doesn't want leverage. She wants me."

"You'd better hope so."

Maureen hung up, and then my phone stayed eerily dark and silent. Jack didn't call. My friends didn't call. And most deafening of all, Layla didn't call. She didn't answer my calls either. I even called Jack.

“Don’t ever call here again,” he said in a flat, deathly cold voice.

“Jack, I—”

But he hung up before I could finish.

“—love her.”

I was tied up for a few days, dealing with the Blake situation. My lawyer wasn’t making me feel good about my odds. Blake had filed a restraining order which somehow prevented me from going to my own fucking office since he had thus far retained his brand development team under Cross Media. It made no sense why he’d keep us, except that he knew it was making my life harder.

Finally, I came to my senses. “Fire him,” I ordered Maureen.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking sure. He attacked Layla.”

Maureen was quiet, like she’d been waiting for me to confirm that. “Is she going to testify to that, if she has to?”

“Of course she is.”

My response was knee jerk, but beneath it, the pit was widening, deepening, darkening. I couldn’t see the bottom or feel the sides anymore. I was hollowing out. *Would* Layla testify for me? *Had* I been mistaken? Why wasn’t she returning my calls? Where the hell was she?

I went by her place at least once a day, but she was never there. At least, she never answered her door. I even slow crawled past Jack’s house, but there was no sign of her car. Then, on Friday night, six days after my world went to hell, it went away. Blake dropped the charges. He released a statement about it being a misunderstanding. He apologized to the unnamed woman who had been involved. He was going to work on himself and figure out how this could have happened.

Astounded, I called Layla again. I was so sure that now this one thing had fallen into place, the rest would too. I was as stunned when she didn’t answer as I was when I walked into that empty hotel room. I went by her place and

knocked on the door until the next door neighbor came out to see who the hell couldn't take a hint. I parked on the street across from Jack's house and stared at the large picture window through which I could just catch a glimpse of movement when people passed through the living room.

But none of those people was ever Layla.

It was like she had never been. Like I'd made her up, and Liv and Bran and her apartment had just been part of the illusion. I worried about myself. On Saturday morning, even though I hadn't slept more than a handful of consecutive hours in over a week, I went to see Carl.

When I pulled up with donuts and a liter of coffee, Carl looked legitimately concerned for the first time in our acquaintance.

"Man, isn't that like, fifty cups of coffee?"

I set it down on the top stair and filled my paper cup. "Relax. It's only thirty."

He choked on something that wasn't really a laugh. "Christ. What the hell happened to you?"

I scrubbed my free hand over my face and raised my cup to my lips with my other hand. "It's a long story, Carl. You don't want to hear it."

"I actually do."

I had my head tipped back, my eyes on the sky, pouring the coffee down my throat, but I sensed that he was staring at me with fascination.

"Listen man, I know I say this a lot but you *actually* look like shit right now."

"That's how I feel, Carl." I swallowed and felt it in my scalded throat. "Let's talk about you."

"Nah, man. This thing is supposed to go both ways, right? You're supposed to *mentor* me and tell me how to grow up to be an outstanding citizen."

"An *upstanding* citizen. And what's your point?"

"My point is that you can't just show me your baller car and flash your Platinum card. You've got to tell me the ways you've fucked up, too, or this situation is just some aspirational bullshit."

I was surprised that Carl used the word aspirational. I was impressed he was making this argument at all. Again, I got that glimpse of him in a courtroom. “What makes you think *I’ve* fucked up?” I muttered, squeezing the flimsy cup in my hand.

“My two fucking eyes, okay?” Carl depressed the button on the carafe and filled his own cup. “Now let’s hear it. Tell me a bedtime story, old man. Then maybe I’ll show you my progress report and let you tuck me into a new pair of shoes.”

I lowered my head and stared at the weeds pushing through the cracked cement. It was almost November and a cold snap had it feeling like the holidays. Didn’t these scrubby plants know when to give up and die?

It appeared they didn’t, and Carl wasn’t giving up either. I gave in and told him the basic outline of what had happened in New York. It didn’t feel good—every word felt like someone was pulling it out of my mouth with pliers. Uprooting each one. I kept going though, because future lawyer Carl was right. He should know about how I’d fucked up. How I nearly lost everything.

How maybe I still had.

At the end of it, I expected a loud guffaw. Some disbelieving scoffing. You did *what*? Over a *pu*—I mean a *girl*? Man, you’re even stupider than I thought. I’m gonna call up this program and ask for a new mentor. One who isn’t dumb as a brick fucking wall.

I got what I expected. Carl had to walk away for a few minutes. I watched him as he walked all the way to the end of the sidewalk and then came back, his head shaking furiously like one of those doggy dashboard ornaments.

But after he was done doing that, he sat back down and said, “So what are you going to do now?”

I crumpled my cup completely. “I’m going to go back to work.”

Carl’s eyes flickered and he waited a beat, like he thought I wasn’t done. “*And?*” he demanded.

“And launch a counter offensive to make sure everyone has seen the news—

that I'm not the asshole in this story." I was already strategizing that with Maureen. I thought that with Blake's statement about reflecting on his actions, it stood a good chance of repairing my reputation.

"What about the bit-girl?"

As always, at the thought of Layla, my heart wrung painfully. "The girl is gone, Carl. That's how it is sometimes." I heard the hard, bleak shell coating each word. "She's made it pretty clear she doesn't want anything to do with me."

Carl regarded me with the most disdain he had ever managed to fit on his narrow, angular face. It filled his eyes, changed the shape of his forehead, hung off the curve of his sneer. "Man, I was kidding before, but now I'm serious. I don't want your quitter ass as my mentor."

I sneered back at him, but it dropped off my face when he began unlacing his shoes. The ones I'd bought him for his first report card on which he got AB honor roll for the first time in his life. He'd kept them pristinely white even though they were always on his feet, every time I saw him. Even now, as he yanked them off his feet, he took a moment to buff out a smudge on the toe.

"Here," he said roughly, slapping them down on the step beside me and half turning his body away, like he couldn't bear to look at them. "Now take your giant ass box of coffee and get gone."

"For fuck's sake," I muttered, boxing my temples between my palms and squeezing. "Are you serious?"

"I'm dead ass serious. I agreed to this program because I need someone to teach me how to be a *man*. Not a little bitch."

Despite the rough tone, it was the most vulnerable I'd ever heard Carl. Any other time I asked him why he was in this program, he made a joke about the free shit or how he'd always wanted a clown at his birthday party. Lucky him, he got me every Saturday. He wasn't joking with me now though. He looked pathetic and defiant and somehow badass climbing the rotting wooden steps in his white socks.

"Jesus, Carl. Put your fucking shoes back on. If it's so important to you, I'll call her."

He snorted and kept climbing. “You’ll call her?” he mocked. “Don’t forget to leave a message with she direct-to-voicemails your sorry ass.”

I stood up as he reached the top of the steps. His hand was on the door handle when I finally barked, “Fine, I’ll go to her fucking dad’s house so he can beat the shit out of me. Will that make you happy?”

He glanced back over his shoulder consideringly. “Yeah. I think it might.”

“Fine.” I picked up his shoes and lobbed them at him, one at a time. “Then put these back on. I’ll be back next Saturday.”

“I’ll visit you in the hospital next Saturday,” he corrected, catching them easily.

I flipped him the middle finger as I stomped back to my car.

“You gonna leave your coffee, man?” he called after me. “That’s fine with me. I’m going to set myself up a lemonade stand.”

I drove off without answering, but when I glanced back at him in the rearview mirror, I thought I saw him grinning like he’d just won something.

Yeah, he was going to make a damn good lawyer.

CHAPTER 33

LAYLA



I spent the week in my childhood bed, staring at the ceiling. Cross Media's HR had put me on a week-long leave of absence, and I was grateful. I kept my hands folded over my abdomen as though if I kept them there long enough, eventually I would believe there was a real baby in there. My baby. Aiden's baby. Apparently, the three pink plus signs on the pregnancy tests I still had lined up on my bathroom sink weren't enough proof.

Even if my brain wouldn't accept it though, my body wouldn't let me forget. The sudden nausea and exhaustion made so much sense now, I didn't know how I hadn't seen it before. I suppose because I hadn't wanted to. I'd fallen in love with Aiden before I had the chance to rationalize it. With Christian, I'd done my legwork. I'd gotten to know him. I'd ascertained that we both wanted roughly the same thing—to establish our careers, then have children. With Aiden, just like with this baby, my body had succumbed before my brain had a chance to catch up.

As far as I knew, he didn't want children. That had been one of the issues between him and Shara, wasn't it? The Disney Plus subscription he'd never wanted. *I* wanted children though, and I wanted this one. It was funny how even as I struggled to conceptualize the reality that I was pregnant, my heart was already wrapped around the idea. In seven months, give or take a few weeks, I would be a mother.

Liv had gone out of town on her own business trip, but when she got back in town, she came over right away. I was in my room, of course. She tapped on the door and then poked her head in without waiting for an invitation.

“Hi,” she said, coming all the way in when she saw only me in the room. She crawled up on the side of my bed and sat cross legged, looking down at me. “Rough week?”

I laughed drily. It had been a long time since my body had tried to produce that particular sound. “You could say that.”

Liv tilted her head, and her long brown hair slid off her shoulder. Her face was a question mark, but she was having trouble figuring out where to start. Finally, she just asked, “What *happened*, Layla?”

I lifted one hand palm up as if to say, *your guess is as good as mine*. “Blake was even worse than we thought. Aiden put his fist through his nose.”

“And you’re pregnant.”

I looked at her sharply. Had that hit the news too somehow? Then I relaxed. “Bran?”

“He thought I knew.” Liv struggled not to sound disapproving. “I called you.”

My phone was in the bed somewhere with me, but it was dead. I hadn’t bothered to charge it in a few days. Too many people were calling. I had no idea how strangers had gotten my number, but they had, and they all wanted my side of the story.

“I get that,” Liv said when I explained. “But what about Aiden? Surely, he’s trying to get in touch with you.”

I stared up at the ceiling. Aiden was the other reason I’d let my phone die. I loved him too much to talk to him while I sorted out my complicated tangle of emotions about this baby. I was afraid that if he’d so much as hinted that he didn’t want to be a father, my emotions might have slid toward him the way everything else in my life had. I tried to tell Liz that, but she didn’t get it.

“I’m sure Aiden will support whatever you want to do.”

I choked on a laugh. “I’m glad *you’re* sure. I have no idea.”

“But you don’t think he’d pressure you either way, do you?” Liv’s voice took on that hard edge that it got when she felt like someone’s rights needed defending.

I shook my head, feeling how flat and deflated my pillow was after days of bearing the weight of my head. “No. But I’m afraid—” I broke off as tears formed a cloudy hazy between my eyeballs and the ceiling. I sniffed and swallowed. “I’m afraid he won’t want to be with me.”

Liv’s face softened and she laid down beside me. “He’s in love with you. He’s going to love this baby.”

“I already love it,” I said, letting the tears slip down. “And if he doesn’t, I might hate him for it.”

She nodded understandingly. Somehow, she found my hand through the pile of blankets and squeezed it reassuringly. “But then you’ll get over it because you’ll have a baby to raise.”

I wasn’t so sure that was possible. I’d never loved anyone like I loved Aiden. It was all consuming, all encompassing. I’d *had* to cut off communication, or I wouldn’t have been able to think.

“Do you know what he’s going through right now?” Liv asked tentatively. “I mean, are you following the story at all?”

I blinked at her. “The story?”

She nodded. “It’s a minor league scandal. Blake is saying that Aiden attacked him because you came onto him.”

I struggled to wrap my mind around this. Then, as it hit, I struggled up into a sitting position. “Wait. You’re telling me that even though Blake dragged me into an empty room and tried to assault me, *Aiden* is coming off as the bad guy?”

Liv nodded again. “That’s the narrative that Blake is spinning.”

“But I told the police—”

She lifted her shoulder and let it drop. “I’m just telling you what’s out there.”

For the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I felt something other than dazed confusion. Anger crept through, bright and shining like a spear. I grabbed onto it. “That bastard has some nerve.”

Liv pushed up too. She eyed me with a combination of wariness and hope. “I mean, no one is producing a counter narrative or whatever you marketing people call it.”

“I can’t believe Aiden hasn’t done anything.” I stared at Liv as if she might have the answer. I certainly didn’t, and here I thought I knew him so well.

“Maybe it’s because you’ve gone radio silent on him,” Liv suggested. “Maybe *he* is starting to believe the narrative.”

That was insane. That was impossible. That was—I fell back on my pillow again and stared intently at the ceiling. I was searching my memory of that horrible few minutes for anything I could use to refute Liv’s suggestion. Some moment where I had looked gratefully at Aiden or touched his arm or anything. I couldn’t think of a single thing. It had been too quick, too ugly. I’d thought we would be together again soon. I hadn’t known about the baby and the time I would need to adjust to that.

Had I somehow made Aiden doubt himself? Doubt us? Was that why he wasn’t banging down my family’s door right now? Because though I had barely admitted this to myself, it hurt that he hadn’t. It had made me feel like his regret for what he’d done to my dad was bigger than his love for me.

Had we both been operating under bad assumptions?

“Yes,” Liv said when I asked. She nodded her head vigorously. “You know what they say about assumptions. Asses, both of you.”

“I have to fix this.”

But despite the spirited words, I couldn’t quite bring myself to sit up again.

“Fix it?” Liv echoed.

“I need to tell Blake that I’ll call back every single media outlet and tell them he assaulted me if he doesn’t retract everything right now.”

“Oh right, the truth.” Liv considered. “Maybe you should just do that. Why give him an out?”

“Because if I do that, it’ll become he said versus she said,” I said grimly. “I don’t want that. I just want Aiden’s name cleared. I’ll let Blake play it down. He can make a vague statement about bad choices and getting help.”

“No,” Liv said suddenly, dead serious. “He has to agree to actually *get* help, Layla. You can’t let him get away that easily. What about the next girl?”

I nodded, seeing her point. “I’ll also tell him that if any woman ever comes forward with a story about him, the deal is off. I’ll tell the world what he did.”

There was a strange sort of irony to the fact that after weeks of feeling strange and sick, the first time I felt strong again was on my way to confront Blake. I thought the anxiety would make my nausea worse than ever, but to my surprise, there was no anxiety. Instead, there was a strange sort of power rushing through my veins as I walked into his building where he’d agreed to meet—with his lawyer—in one of the common rooms.

After Liv left, I’d reviewed the media coverage of the incident. I was surprised by how much play it got, but it was a slow news week. Every statement I read made my blood boil. Liv had been right, Blake was playing the role of victim to the hilt, and Aiden wasn’t doing a damn thing to counter. It wasn’t like him.

The sight of Blake made my fingers curl into reflexive fists. His big hands were flat on the table as if to show he was innocent, but I remembered them wrapped around my wrist, the dizzying blur of the carpet pattern passing underneath my reluctant footsteps. My eyes were narrow when I walked in, and he met them with an injured, innocent expression.

He started to speak, but his lawyer did it for him. “Mrs. Davis, my client agreed to meet with you against my advice.”

“That’s because your client knows I can ruin his career.” I sat down across from Blake. I noticed that today, his eyes fastened on a point somewhere between my eyebrows and the top of my head rather than on my breasts.

“I didn’t assault you, Layla,” Blake said, his eyes appealing to me to agree.

“You left bruises on my wrist, and you would have done more if Aiden hadn’t found us.”

His lawyer’s voice buzz sawed between us, as if he could cut this off if he talked loudly and long enough. Through it, though, I caught Blake’s eye. He knew. Maybe at the time he really had thought I wanted him, that Aiden was an inconvenience to escape from. I would never know for sure. All I was sure of was that he knew *now*.

“I’m sorry if I misinterpreted the situation,” he said awkwardly, and his lawyer’s face turned purple even as he kept yammering on. It was like he thought this was being recorded and he was doing his best to mess up the audio.

“I need two things from you Blake, but neither is an apology.” I took a deep breath. “I need you to clear Aiden’s name.”

His mouth opened in knee jerk refusal.

“You have to tell the world what you told me—that you misinterpreted the situation. That you’re sorry.”

Blake closed his mouth reluctantly. “That *is* what happened.”

“Sure. Let’s say it is.” I leaned forward, my eyes intent on his. “You need to get some sort of treatment, Blake. You legitimately seem to think that every woman you see wants you. You need to learn how to see people, and not just see your reflection in their eyes.”

“My client does not need to—”

“And if you don’t, I’m going to tell the world what happened from *my* perspective.” I turned my wrists upright deliberately. The fingertip bruise had faded from my left one, but the implication was clear.

Blake’s mouth was set. He didn’t want to do this, but he had agreed to meet

with me because he knew I could ruin him. Knew I *would* ruin him if he continued to run Aiden's name through the mud.

I left half an hour later with an agreement in place. Blake was going to stop by his new marketing team's office this afternoon to draft his statement. I thought that the adrenaline would drop and leave me flatlining, but to my surprise, it settled into my blood like a pleasant hum. I didn't know what would happen, but I knew that I wasn't going to get in bed and hide under the covers anymore.

I was going to be a mom.

Now it was time to see if Aiden wanted to be a dad.

CHAPTER 34

AIDEN



I went to Jack's house and had it out with him. He wanted to punch me in the face, but he held back. "She's not here," he growled instead and tried to slam the door closed on me.

I caught the door just in time, managing to keep it open a few inches.

"Just punch me, Jack," I said tiredly. "I would do it if I were you. But if it means anything, I love her."

"It doesn't mean shit," he informed me, but he stopped pushing on his side of the door. He regarded me for a moment, then said, "Sit down. I'll come out."

I wondered if that meant he was lying and that Layla really was inside. Hope lit like a match in my chest. Jack had walked away from the door, but I didn't push my way in to test my theory. I had to face him first. Then I could face the person who mattered most.

Jack came out with a beer for each of us, which I took as a good sign. Granted he'd gotten himself a craft beer from the Tree House Brewing Company and I was handed a half-frozen Bud Light that I guessed had been stuck in the back of the refrigerator since Christmas. Still, it was closer to a peace offering than a go fuck yourself. I popped the top.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” Jack said after a few minutes of sitting in silence. “What the fuck, Aiden? You aren’t ugly. You aren’t poor. All the women in Boston, and you chose my daughter?”

I winced. “I didn’t choose her, Jack. I did everything I could to stay away from her. I’d have fired her if I could have justified it.”

“You should have.”

“I fell in love with her.”

His mouth tightened, like that was neither a justification nor a balm.

“No one will ever treat her better than I will.”

“Layla doesn’t need taking care of.” Jack rolled his shoulders back irritably. I noticed he was wearing a T-shirt instead of his usual professor garb. The better with which to beat the shit out of your best friend. I wondered if he was still considering it. “She’s too smart and too strong.”

“I know.”

“She needs someone who can match her, and–” he finally turned to me with something other than anger in his eyes. Instead, it was worry. “–and no offense, pal. You’re younger than me, but not by much old man.”

I almost laughed, but the moment was too serious. The stakes were too high. “I am old compared to her,” I agreed soberly. “But that’s not all bad, Jack. I know who I am. I know what I want. I’ve made my mistakes. I’m ready for whatever she’s ready for. And yeah, in forty years, she might be pushing me around in a wheelchair, but I’ll give her the best four decades of her life first.”

Jack’s lips almost twitched before they flatlined again. “She wants to be a mom. You’ve never wanted kids.”

My heart pinched. “I know,” I said neutrally. “Until I fell in love with her. Now I get it.”

Jack studied me, and again I had the feeling he knew something I didn’t. “Layla’s an adult,” he said finally. “I’m not going to stand in the way of what she wants. I couldn’t if I tried. But she isn’t here, and don’t even ask me

where she is because I wouldn't tell you even if I knew. Which I don't. And if you do fuck this up—”

“You'll beat the shit out of me. I know. And I'll deserve it. But I promise you I won't.”

I stood up. Now that I knew Layla wasn't here, I was itching to get back in my car and drive over to her apartment. Then I'd check the office, and then, hell, I didn't know. But I would find her.

When I knocked, Layla opened the door to her apartment like she'd been expecting me.

Surprise and joy leapt up in my throat, but the look on her face held me immobile. She had a faint smile on her lips, but there was a clear, determined look in her eyes that I'd never seen before. She was dressed casually in comfortable drawstring pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, but there was an aura of confidence around her. She glowed.

“Come in,” she said when I just stood there, looking at her.

Inside, there was a large water bottle on the breakfast table. One of the big reusable ones with the markings tell you how much you should have drunk by what time. I studied it, wondering when she'd gotten it. It seemed significant somehow. I knew Layla had had bigger things to worry about besides hydration over the last few days—and yet...

Turning back to her, I cleared my throat. I wasn't sure what to say.

Layla started. “I'm sorry I turned off my phone. I was processing...a lot.”

“I was processing it too,” I said evenly. “It would have helped to do it with you.”

She lowered her eyes and they found the focal point of the water bottle, too. “I know.”

There was a wall between us, but I couldn't see what it was made out of. I walked into the living room, then came back. This apartment was nice enough, but it failed the pacing test. I would have to stand still with my confusion and questions. I'd thought, subconsciously, that the reason Layla had stopped communicating with me was because she was traumatized. I still didn't know everything that had happened between her and Blake. She didn't look traumatized though; she looked beautiful. A little paler than usual, but there was a glow to her skin I hadn't seen before. The dichotomy further complicated my struggle to understand.

"What happened?" I asked quietly, lowering myself onto one of the wooden chairs. I didn't want to sit on the couch and find out whether she chose to sit next to me or on the loveseat opposite.

Layla sat in the chair nearest me, pulling it out so that our knees were facing each other. She felt both very close and very far. Again, I had the feeling I was looking at two things that couldn't be true at the same time. That had to be love shining in her eyes, but why was she sitting so rigidly with her fingers fighting each other in her lap? She looked like I had felt when I told Shara I wanted a divorce. Guilty and sad and hopeful that I was doing the right thing. But I hadn't loved Shara by that point, and Layla loved me. I could see it.

"What happened with Blake was... not great," she said, her eyes sliding away from mine. "Thank God you were there."

A knot of tension loosened in my stomach. "I'm just sorry I wasn't there sooner."

She waved her hand. "You were there in time. I'm sorry about the lies Blake told. I didn't know about them until a couple of days ago. It wasn't just my phone I was avoiding. It was everything."

I nodded like I understood, but I didn't.

Layla took a deep breath. "Aiden, what you don't know is that the same night you got arrested, I found out I'm pregnant."

For a minute, the syllables separated themselves and floated just out of my grasp, refusing to come together and reveal their meaning. I mentally grasped

for them, knowing that if I could fit them together, everything would make more sense. Then, like magnets, they slammed back together, and the meaning burst into my brain.

Layla was pregnant with my child.

I didn't know what she read on my face, but the few seconds of silence while I put together her words had dimmed the hopeful look on hers. Her fingers stopped their restless knitting and froze in her lap. The bones of her knuckles glistened through her skin. "I'm going to have this baby. But I can do it alone."

Those words didn't make sense either. I had the sense that this conversation was a bullet train racing past me. I was too close to it to make sense of what I was seeing, and it was going too fast for me to jump on. I was going to miss it.

Layla opened her mouth to say something else, but I held up a hand. "Wait." I watched the last week play out in front of my eyes again, and suddenly, it looked very different. She hadn't disappeared because she was traumatized by Blake or disgusted by me, and she definitely hadn't stopped taking my calls because anything Blake had said was true.

She had been adjusting to the reality that now I was floundering in. We were going to have a baby. Joy hit me, but then the last thing she'd said to me played in my head again.

I can do it alone.

"Alone?" I repeated. "Why the hell would you do it alone, Layla?"

Her gaze was cautious as she searched mine. She was leaning forward now, and the tight knot of her fingers was loosening. "If you don't want to be a dad, Aiden, you don't have to be. I didn't do this to trap you."

"Trap me?" I choked on the idea. "Are you fucking with me, Layla? You couldn't trap me if you tried. I'm not trying to go anywhere. With you is the only place I want to be. And if we're going to be parents—" I blew out my breath, unable to put into words how much this elevated things. I wouldn't have left her before, now I couldn't. Not because she'd trapped me, but because she'd made everything so unbelievably *rich*.

She stared at me for a long moment without blinking. I got the feeling I'd shocked her. "But you don't want kids," she said with certainty.

"I didn't want kids with anyone but you." I wanted to respect her space, especially after what had happened with Blake, but I couldn't stop myself. I reached out and grabbed her hand. To my relief, I felt her fingers relax and wrap around mine. "I want everything with you, Layla."

The certainty in her eyes was cracking up. Slowly, the truth of what I was saying was getting to her. She'd built defenses around herself, so sure that I would leave. I took her other hand and squeezed tightly. "I'm not going anywhere," I said quietly, hoping the repetition would help tear them down faster. "I'm in love with you."

"I'm in love with you, too." Her fractured gaze started to coalesce again. She blinked several times and met my eyes. For the first time since I showed up on her doorstep, I felt like I could see *her* again. She was wrapped in confidence and vulnerability, and the glow that I'd noticed in her skin was entering her eyes. Her lips began to curve the longer we stared at each other.

"Is that enough?" she wondered. "To overcome everything?"

"What's there to overcome? I survived my first encounter with Jack."

The quick smile on her face told me she already knew that. Her mother must have called after I left.

"And Blake miraculously dropped his allegations, so we don't have to worry about conjugal visits," I continued, encouraged by the light and the smile.

Her smile deepened, and there was a flash of something in her eyes that I couldn't read. I wondered if I'd ever know her completely. I hoped I'd get to spend the rest of my life finding out.

"How did it go with my dad?" she asked, skipping over the Blake situation entirely.

"Your dad reminded me I'm old as hell, but we agreed that if I could give you forty good years, he'd give me his blessing."

"His blessing?" Her eyebrows rose.

“Maybe I exaggerated that part,” I admitted. “If I can give you forty good years, he’ll let me stay in one piece.”

“Forty years.” Layla’s eyes sparkled with tears and, I hoped, happiness. “That sounds good.”

I stood and pulled her up with me. “It’s a good start anyway.”

“A start,” she agreed, threading her arms around my neck and pulling my face down to meet hers. And when her lips met mine, I felt the stress of the last week fall away. More than that. I felt the relentless pressure to succeed that I’d carried on my shoulders my entire life shift off.

EPILOGUE

LAYLA



Our daughter Abigail was born six and a half months later. A few days after her first birthday, I spent the night with Liv at our old apartment. She and Bran now shared it, and even though they still technically had separate bedrooms, I knew they spent most nights with each other.

“This feels like old times,” Liv said when she threw open the door. I knocked, even though I still had a key.

“Yes, all the old times when we had bouquets of penis-shaped balloons in front of the TV,” Bran said, joining her at the door.

I laughed, seeing them bobbing about behind his head. “Liv, this isn’t a bachelorette party. It’s not even a bridal shower.”

“I know, but you didn’t want either of those things, and I’d already bought these balloons, so...” Liv shrugged as she led me in.

“She’d also already bought this bedazzled *Bride* hat,” Bran said, tossing it to me.

I put it on gamely.

“And these plastic wedding ring shot glasses.”

I accepted the ring on my right hand and held out both hands to compare. My ring finger on my left hand sparkled. Even after sixteen months of wearing it, the round diamond on the thin gold band still took my breath away. The large, gaudy ornament on my right hand made me laugh, but I wouldn't let Liv pour anything into it.

“No, I'm not going to be hungover on my wedding day.”

My wedding day. A glow that started at my toes and worked its way up filled my entire body. I was excited to spend this last night of unmarried life with my bridal party—my best friend and my brother—but I couldn't wait for the morning. I missed Abigail already, but I saw the wisdom of letting her sleep at my parents' house. In the morning, I would be busy getting ready with Liv and Bran for one of the biggest days of my life.

The day I officially became Mrs. Cross.

The morning dawned, bright and clear and freezing cold. Ice clung to the skeletal branches of the trees outside. The heat pumping out of the fireplace warded off the chill and put a fine mist on the windows. The casual, joyous atmosphere of the night before had hushed into something reverent and solemn.

It was my wedding day.

Liv smiled sleepily at me when I came out into the common room. She and Bran had stayed up later than me, and they were clutching warm mugs of coffee to counteract it. I made myself tea. I already had a leaping fire of excitement in my chest—I didn't need caffeine to fan the flames.

Bran gave me a hug, and I rested in it because it was so unusual. We were close, but we didn't hug very often. When Cecilia, our little sister, showed up, she hugged me too.

Liv put on music. She picked a random wedding playlist, and it pumped out songs from some of our favorite romantic movies. Bran rolled his eyes at it,

and Cecilia asked if we could put on something more upbeat, but I loved it. We got ready to it, and even Bran and Cecilia came around. I was glad it was just the four of us in the apartment. Liv had asked if I wanted to get my hair and makeup professionally done, but I'd decided against it. We were having a casual wedding, and I wanted to look like myself when Aiden saw me in my dress for the first time.

Liv and Cecilia sat on the bed while I traded my pajamas for my wedding dress. It was a white, tea-length dress with a scooped neck and lace sleeves, and it made me feel beautiful. Liv and Cecilia were already in their blue-green dresses, and there were three bouquets lined up on Liv's dresser.

I stepped into my high heels and turned to face them, presenting the final look. Cecilia clapped, looking faintly bored. Liv, though, teared up. "You look like a bride."

I laughed. "That's good, since that's what I am."

"I know, I just thought that since it wasn't a full-on wedding dress, I wouldn't cry. But here I am, and we haven't even left the apartment yet." Liv reached for a tissue and dabbed at her eyes, annoyed with herself.

There was a polite *tap tap* on the bedroom door. Bran was on the other side, acting like this wasn't basically his bedroom too.

"You can come in," I called. "I'm dressed."

He came in, squinting. "Isn't it bad luck to see the bride in her dress before the wedding?"

"Only if you're the groom." Liv scooted over to make room for him on the bed.

He gave me a once over and said, "You look nice."

Liv rolled her eyes at him. "You don't tell the bride she looks *nice*, Bran. People want to look nice for their driver's license picture or their first day of work. Brides are beautiful."

He rolled his eyes back at her, and then they grinned at each other. I wondered if one day, a few years from now, I would be the one on the bed

watching Liv getting ready for *her* wedding to Bran. I hoped so.

At exactly ten thirty, a sleek black town car pulled up outside Liv and Bran's apartment building.

"It's here," Cecilia reported, rubbing her sleeve over the window so she could see out better.

Liv was already holding all three bouquets and both of our purses, but she looked around nervously like there was something she might be forgetting.

By contrast, I felt wonderfully and fantastically relaxed. I didn't know you could be relaxed and excited at the same time, but you could. I was filled with a bubbling, fizzing, carbonated happiness, but I wasn't in any hurry. We made our way downstairs, returning the smiles of the group that passed us in the stairwell.

"Best wishes," one called down, her voice echoing in the concrete space.

"Congratulations," another called.

I thought about my luck on the way to the small cathedral in downtown Boston. I had made a good catch. I was the rare, lucky girl who had gotten everything she'd ever wanted and found out that she'd been right to want it. We'd only been together for two years now, but it felt like we'd always been together.

Seeing him become a father had only made me love him more. He was enchanted by Abigail. His single-minded focus on building his business had broadened the moment she was born. Maureen was now co-CEO, and Aiden could be found on the playground almost as often as he could be found in his office. I was there more than him, still pursuing my own dreams.

The town car carried us into the heart of downtown Boston, letting us off at on the curb in front of the small, nondenominational cathedral we'd chosen. Neither of us were particularly religious, but we both believed that something had designed this universe with benevolence and intention. There was no other way to explain how we'd found our way to each other despite all the odds.

One of the odds was standing out front, his hands buried deep in the pockets

of his winter coat, a tweed cap pulled low over his face. He lit up when the town car docked itself on the curb. He helped Bran out, then Liv and Cecilia. Then he tilted sideways to look in at me, a rueful grin on his face.

“It’s not too late to ditch the senior citizen,” my dad said, but I knew he was joking. He had transitioned from grudging to wholehearted acceptance of mine and Aiden’s relationship the day he met Abigail. He reached a hand in for me, and I took it, letting him help me out of the car.

It was barely twenty degrees, and I hadn’t bothered to put a coat on over my dress, but I wasn’t cold. I turned to look at my dad, my heart beginning to beat faster now that we were here. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful.” He kissed my cheek with his cold lips and then hustled us all into the antechamber of the cathedral. I took a few minutes to cuddle my daughter in her little white gown and coo over the bow my mom had affixed to her sparse red hair.

“Okay, I’ve got to take her.” My dad held out his arms, and Abigail went into them happily. Just like Bran, Liv, and Cecilia were my bridal party, my dad, Abigail, and Carl were his.

He was gone only a few moments before I heard the music start up. It was Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” that signaled we needed to get ready. We slipped out of the small room in order—Cecilia, Liv, Bran, and then me. My mother and Aiden’s mother were already seated with the handful of guests we’d invited. Through the louvered windows that separated the hallway from the cathedral, I saw that the Brand Development team was in the second row. Joe and Gloria were holding hands.

When the music changed to Beethoven’s “Piano Sonata No. 14,” Cecilia fluffed one of the flowers on her bouquet and stepped out.

“Are you ready for this?” Bran asked in the last few moments before he followed Liv out.

“More than ready,” I whispered back, and then he was gone.

I took a deep breath as they finished their walk up the aisle. I couldn’t see Aiden yet because I was standing just out of sight, but my heart beat faster, thinking about him. And then the distinct notes of the wedding march started

up, and it was time.

I stepped into the entrance and everyone rose as one, turning to look back at me. Two dozen pairs of eyes, two dozen wide smiles. Some cheeks were already damp with tears. I looked through all of them and found Aiden's gaze locked on mine.

He wasn't crying, but his eyes were shining with love.

I love you, I love you, I love you, I thought as I walked toward him. Then I was right in front of him. He was reaching for my hand.

I remembered being fourteen and realizing for the first time he wasn't just my dad's younger, sort of cool-looking, best friend.

I remembered being sixteen and realizing I was in love with him.

Eighteen and thinking I'd lost him to Shara forever.

Twenty-five and knowing that I still loved him but thinking that it was impossible. It could never work.

Now, as his fingers entwined with mine, I gave a silent prayer of gratitude for everything we had been through. The hardest part was behind us.

And forever was in front of us.

FALLING FOR THE NANNY (PREVIEW)



Enjoyed the story?

Here's the preview of my other recently released novel

Stories can be read standalone!

Enjoy this free sample!

CHAPTER 1

CAT



I sat in the inevitable traffic jam that was Route 7 at rush hour, picking the glitter paint off my arm and checking my reflection in the rearview mirror at red lights. On Fridays, I drove straight from the Little Tykes daycare in Vienna to my bartending job in Great Falls, and I didn't want my coworkers to have to pull stickers out of my hair again.

I could only see a little of myself in the mirror. Enough to tell me that the mascara I'd put on this morning was flaking off and I looked tired. Not older than my twenty-six years, but pale and drawn, like they'd been long ones. Luckily, the insane amount of traffic gave me plenty of time to fix my makeup and brush my hair into a high, perky ponytail. It also gave me time to stress out about finances. I needed to make money tonight. Rent was due in two days. My roommate/best friend Alyssa could probably spot me the difference, but I hated to ask her. Again.

I turned onto a narrow, winding road lined by mansions and wondered what it would be like to have this kind of money. Not just be comfortable, like my parents in the small house that they'd bought thirty years ago, but to have so much money that your driveway was practically its own road and your house sat on the lot the size of a football field. I couldn't wrap my head around it. I wasn't even sure I *wanted* to live in a house so big you could legitimately lose someone in it, but it would be nice not to worry about rent and utilities

and groceries. To have enough left over to go out to dinner once in a while, or maybe even on a vacation.

“But you chose this,” I said aloud. “You could be in Chicago right now with Devon.”

As always, the memory of my ex-boyfriend brought a mixture of emotions. I missed him—or at least the idea of him—but I was also vastly relieved not to be in Chicago with him. He’d offered me everything I could have ever wanted if I went with him. He’d be making plenty of money, he said. I could get a job if I wanted, or I could focus on writing. Was I worried about moving there with him because we’d only been dating a year? Did I need a commitment? We could go to the jeweler right now.

I’d been tempted. Oh, I’d been so tempted. But it never would have worked. I just didn’t love him enough. So I stayed behind and continued working two jobs and working on my writing in between them.

“I chose this,” I said again, this time feeling more upbeat about it. It was better to be tired and glittery and poor than to be with the wrong person. I was sure of it. Too many of my friends had grabbed onto significant others like life rafts as we entered our senior year of college, holding onto them like they were the only thing keeping them from drowning. Now they were four years deep in relationships that should have been weekend flings, and I barely recognized some of them.

By the time I walked into the restaurant and saw Alyssa behind the bar, I was feeling downright cheerful.

“Hi sunshine,” she said, noting my bright smile. “Good day with the kiddos?”

“Oh, sure, they all are.”

She laughed like I was kidding, then tried to smother it. “I still can’t believe you *like* changing diapers and having babies burp up on you all day,” she said with a shake of her head. “And then you get to come here and have drunks throw up on you.”

I glanced around, glad the bar was still almost completely empty at 4:30. It meant I could relax a minute while Alyssa set up the bar. “You’re the only drunk that’s thrown up on me,” I reminded her, sliding onto a barstool and

flexing my feet in my black, no-skid sneakers. “And I love you, but I’d *much* rather take care of babies than you.”

Alyssa made a face at me, but she didn’t argue the point. Nor did she bother to point out that the caretaking had gone both ways. In ten years of friendship, we’d taken turns getting the other home safely. I was hopeful we’d spend the next ten doing the same. And then maybe we’d find fabulous men, get married, and have kids and do that whole thing.

“How’s Parker?” I asked, hoping she’d tell me that she’d finally broken up with him. He was the major threat to my dream of growing old and immature with my best friend. He was straightlaced and buttoned up and basically every other boring description that existed. If he had his way, Alyssa wouldn’t even work at the bar with me. After all, he constantly pointed out, she didn’t need the money. Alyssa had majored in IT, like him.

“Parker is...” Alyssa hesitated. When Tom, our other bartender, rounded the bar, weighed down by two gigantic buckets of ice from the kitchen, she hurried over to help him. The ensuing clatter of ice made it impossible for her to answer my question, but I waited. There was something in the way she’d said *Parker is...* that put a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Parker is what?” I asked as soon as Tom had gone to take the buckets back into the kitchen. “Moving away?”

“Umm.” Alyssa hooked a lock of hair behind her ear and began straightening the bottles of liquor behind the bar. “He is moving, actually.”

I didn’t actually clap my hands together gleefully, but the glee must have shown on my face anyway. Alyssa saw it in the mirrors that lined the back of the bar and frowned at me. “He’s buying a condo in Reston.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. Reston wasn’t quite far enough. Alyssa and I had a townhouse in downtown Herndon, so really, he was moving closer. At least when he was in Arlington, there was about thirty minutes of highway between us.

“And,” Alyssa said, her voice speeding up like she wanted to get this next part over with, “I’m moving in with him.”

“You’re what?” I cupped my ear.

“I’m moving in with him.” Alyssa turned around to face me, her arms crossed over her chest defensively.

I stared at her, open mouthed. I didn’t think she was kidding. Alyssa wasn’t the type to joke around, especially not about something as serious as this, but I still couldn’t quite believe it. “Parker?” I checked. “The guy you said cares more about his stock portfolio than you?”

“I was joking.”

She hadn’t been, I was positive. She had been three Truly’s deep when she told me, and even though Alyssa cried about as much as she joked, there had been a sheen of tears in her eyes. Another confession from that night floated up in my memory, and I seized on it hopefully. “You also said he was bad in bed.”

“I said he was technical.”

“You said *selfish*.” But even as I fought the battle, I knew there was no point. Parker checked all the boxes for Alyssa—he was from a good family, he had an Ivy League degree, he made six figures, and he was over six feet tall. Nothing I said would convince her she had the wrong boxes on her checklist. I couldn’t win, and if I kept trying, I might lose my best friend.

I watched her furiously wipe down the bar, even though it was still immaculate. Parker was right—she didn’t need this job. She still worked here because I still did. Because *I* needed the job to cover my half of our rent. Suddenly, a new and terrible thing occurred to me. If Alyssa was moving in with Parker, who was I going to live with?

“I’ll help you find someone,” Alyssa said, still mad, when I brought it up a couple minutes later. “Or I guess I could ask Parker if…”

“Oh no.” I held up my hands. “There’s no way he’d agree, and besides, I’m not going to be your live in third wheel.” I honestly couldn’t imagine anything worse. Parker and Alyssa were both energetic morning people who liked to roll out of bed right into their running shoes, then come home and make smoothies and the ungodly hour of seven am. On the rare mornings I got to sleep in, I liked to stay in bed as late as possible and eat refined carbohydrates for breakfast.

The Odd Couple thing worked with Alyssa and me. We each kept our judgments silent.

It wouldn't work with Parker.

"I'll figure something out," I said, trying to rally my former optimism. "Maybe I can swing a place on my own."

Alyssa just looked at me, trying to decide whether or not to point out that there was no way I could afford it. Parker wouldn't have made that deliberation. He would have grabbed a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen and ran the numbers right there, then held up the pad to show me how I'd be minus three hundred dollars or whatever at the end of every month. And then he'd say, "Might not be the smartest decision, Cat," in that borderline condescending way I hated.

"Maybe," Alyssa said kindly, then nodded to something over my shoulder. "Hot dad is here. You want to seat him or should I?"

I twisted around on my barstool to see a tall man in an expensive suit walk in, a seven-year-old girl beside him. He glanced around imperiously, waiting for someone to run over. I grabbed a menu and a kids' pack and headed over, even though I hadn't clocked in yet.

"Hi," I said brightly to hot dad. "Your usual table?"

He nodded shortly, then said, "I didn't ask how long it would take, McMann, I *told you* it needed to be done by COB today."

I didn't have to look to see if he had his Bluetooth in his ear. He always did. He wasn't always talking on it, but it was always there, ready to interrupt whatever his daughter was saying. I switched my smile to her and, impulsively, held out my hand. She was a few years older than the kids I worked with at Little Tykes, but she grabbed my hand just as eagerly, her face brightening.

Hot dad's eyebrows rose as I led her to the table ahead of him, our locked hands swinging wide, but all he said was, "Then it looks like you're working Saturday."

After I seated them, I went back into the kitchen to grab the kid's chocolate

milk myself. When I got back, hot dad was still chewing out McMann, and she was trying to get her three-pack of crayons open. Exasperated, I set down her milk and helped her.

“Anything else I can get you?” I asked when she had her three crayons laid out beside her coloring page menu. She gave me a sweet smile and started to say something, but suddenly, hot dad said, “Get it done, McMann,” and then with barely a breath in between, “Excuse me, are you our waitress?”

I must have sat them a dozen times in the past year, then disappeared back into the bar, but I could tell he didn’t remember. “No,” I said with a bright smile, “but I can take your order and give it to your server if you’re ready.” I couldn’t help noticing that his watch was a Rolex, and his key fob was emblazoned with a futuristic rendition of a T. The man probably owned one of the mansions that filled the Great Falls and McLean area. He probably lost his daughter for days in the labyrinthine maze of media rooms and chef’s kitchens.

“I’ll take a Manhattan,” he said shortly, and then suddenly he was talking to McMann again.

I switched my smile to his daughter and knelt down beside the table so I wasn’t looming over her. “What about you?” I asked again. “Got everything you need?”

“She’s fine,” he said exasperated, but I couldn’t tell if he was talking to me or McMann.

“I’m fine,” she said back, lowering her voice like she was telling me a secret.

“I’m going back to the bar, but I’ll keep an eye on your chocolate milk and make sure it doesn’t get empty,” I promised.

“She only gets one, but you can keep an eye on my Manhattan,” hot dad said. I could still hear a faint buzzing coming from his earpiece, so I knew he was listening to McMann, but his eyes were on me. A faint frown on his handsome face, his dark brows pulling into a V over his dark green eyes. It didn’t look like he was mad, exactly, just really intense.

“I’ll do that.” I rose to my feet and winked at the kid. She did her best to return the gesture. Hot dad’s eyebrows just pulled lower, and he turned his

head to look out the window before saying, “I heard you, McMann, I just don’t give a sh–sheep. Yeah, I’m with Lily. I have to let you go, but I’ll check in tonight.”

I left, feeling sorry for his daughter. My parents used to do movie nights on Fridays with popcorn and Milk Duds. We took turns picking the movie. I had a feeling that her Friday nights were very different.

“Wow,” Alyssa commented when I joined her behind the bar. “That’s the longest I’ve ever seen someone talk to hot dad. Did you get his number?”

I rolled my eyes. “He was on a work call the whole time. I feel bad for his kid.”

“I feel bad for me because I’m not his wife,” Alyssa murmured, staring at the back of his head in a way I never saw her look at Parker.

I laughed, a bubble of hope expanding in my chest. If Alyssa could say things like that, surely she didn’t really want to move in with Parker. But in the next second, her smile faded, and her words pricked my bubble.

“Maybe you should ask hot dad if he has a guest house you can rent.”

CHAPTER 2

DAVID



McMann was pissing me off, but I couldn't focus on him anymore. Not with that damn waitress/ hostess/bartender, whatever she was, judging me for being on the phone.

“Get it done, McMann,” I said through my teeth in a way that made Lily’s eyebrows shoot up. Before he could respond, I disconnected the call and pulled the Bluetooth free of my ear. It felt strange, like something was missing. “Sorry, Lils, I’m done working.”

My daughter widened her dark green eyes—the only thing she got of mine—and made a big show of reaching out, turning my wrist over to stare pointedly at the face of my watch. I knew she couldn't read it from her upside-down vantage point, but I got the point. It was definitely after 4:30, and that was my cut off time on Fridays. I wasn't supposed to even look at my email until she went to bed at 8:30.

“How about a second chocolate milk,” I said.

“How about *two* more chocolate milks.”

“How about a second chocolate milk and we split the brownie for dessert.”

Lily’s grin spread across her face. Two parts sweetness, one part smug. An

expression that was purely her mother's, wherever she was. "Deal," she said, letting go of my wrist and sticking out her hand.

We shook on it, then Lily waved eagerly in the direction of the bar and sat back, satisfied. She'd gotten one of the bartender's attention. I couldn't see who was approaching, but I hoped it wasn't the smaller one with the long golden-brown hair and the bright blue eyes, the one that always had a streak of paint or glitter on her somewhere. I preferred the other redhead who looked like she knew the tax law by heart and didn't try to make friends with my kid.

But like most things today, I didn't get my way. The glittery one appeared, her perky ponytail swishing as she put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to grin down at Lily. "I thought you only got one," she said, picking up the empty chocolate milk glass.

"I negotiated," Lily said.

"Smart girl."

Irritated without quite knowing why, I said, "If you're not our waitress, why are you the only one who has been by since we sat down almost ten minutes ago?"

That knocked the playful smile off her face. She glanced back toward the kitchen at the girl she had tapped on the shoulder after seating us. The girl had clearly forgotten she had a table or maybe even a job—she was too busy laughing it up with the manager.

"I—you know what? I can be your waitress. I'm so sorry about that." She yanked the pad of paper out of her apron pocket and clicked a pen. "What can I get you?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say *the manager*, but I caught Lily's eye and relented. I might not have liked this place with its red vinyl booths, weak drinks, and tacky decor, but it was her favorite. And I'd do anything for my daughter.

When we got home after dinner, Mrs. Barnes was waiting at the door. As always, she had a smile on her face that got bigger when she saw Lily. She'd been with us since Lily was born, and she was more of a mother to Lily than my ex-wife ever had been.

That was why, later, after Lily was in bed and Mrs. Barnes sat herself across from me in my office, I wasn't worried at first. I wasn't even worried when she said, "Mr. King, it breaks my heart, but I have to give you my notice."

In fact, I laughed. Then I looked up from my computer and saw Mrs. Barnes' face. Her eyes were filled with tears, and her mouth was puckered with the effort it took to keep them from falling.

"Wait, you're serious?" I demanded, shutting the lid of my laptop.

She nodded.

"But...*why*?"

While she composed herself enough to speak again, I racked my brain for a reason. I knew it wasn't anything to do with Lily, they adored each other. I didn't think it had to do with her pay; I paid her well above the average salary for a live-in nanny. "Am I working too much again?" I asked, seizing on the one complaint she'd had over the years. "I'm putting too much responsibility on you? Is that it?"

"No," Mrs. Barnes said, then corrected herself. "I mean, yes, you're working too much. But you know I love Lily like a daughter."

"Then what is it? Do you want a raise?" I opened my laptop again and searched the documents folder for her contract. She was due for a cost-of-living increase anyway, and if I had to throw another ten thousand dollars on top of her salary, I'd do it.

"It's not about the money, Mr. King." Mrs. Barnes sounded offended now. Her eyes were still wet, but her chin was up and her spine was ramrod straight. "I'm moving to California."

I almost laughed again. Maybe this had been one prolonged, deeply unassuming joke. Who the hell wanted to move to California? They had a different natural disaster every other week, not to mention the inevitable Big One. But then I remembered that Mrs. Barnes' daughter had wanted to live in California. *Did* live in California, in fact, as a screenwriter if I remembered correctly. And she'd just had a baby.

I groaned out loud, the reality of it finally hitting me. This wasn't a joke or a negotiating tactic. Mrs. Barnes was really going to move to California. I was going to lose her. I'd never begged a woman to stay in my life, not even my ex-wife, but I took a deep breath, prepared to do so now. "Mrs. Barnes, please. Is there anything I can do to convince you to stay? This is going to break Lily's heart."

I didn't say it to be manipulative. It was a fact. A few years ago, my daughter had taken the defection of her mother with remarkable aplomb. She'd asked where her mommy was almost every day for six months, cried a few times, and then seemed to forget that her mommy had ever existed outside the four boundaries of her iPad screen. I credited Mrs. Barnes with getting her through it.

Mrs. Barnes knew as well as I did that Lily wasn't going to handle this defection as well. Her tears finally broke through her defenses, slipping down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook and her nose turned red, and she grabbed the box of tissues off my desk. "I'll come back and visit her all the time," she swore. "But my daughter needs me, Mr. King. I've been taking care of other people's children for the last twenty years, and now it's time for me to take care of hers."

I couldn't argue with that, as much as I wanted to. And if I were Mrs. Barnes' daughter, I'd pull rank, too. You couldn't find a better person to take care of your child. I would never be able to replace her.

Mrs. Barnes said she'd help me find someone to fill her role. I told her it would be impossible, but she was welcome to try.

"I'll find someone," she said determinedly, wiping away the last of her tears. "Lily needs someone young anyway. Someone who can help her navigate social situations and has enough energy to keep up with her now that she's in

second grade. Not an old lady like me.”

“I want an old lady exactly like you,” I corrected. I didn’t like the idea of some teenybopper twentysomething taking care of Lily. I wanted someone solid, staid, and grandmotherly.

“She needs a mother figure.” Mrs. Barnes rose to her feet, nodding as if she was agreeing with herself.

She certainly wasn’t agreeing with me. She didn’t even seem to hear me when I said again, louder this time. “I don’t want someone young. Lily *has* a mother.”

Mrs. Barnes had never said a bad word against my ex. She’d just taken up the slack when Chloe left, going from full time to live-in as if that had been the plan all along. I’d heard her murmur, just once, “Who could leave a precious thing like you?” into Lily’s hair when Lily had fallen asleep in her lap. Mrs. Barnes sniffed now though, then she said with sudden seriousness, “Mr. King, Lily is going to need you more than ever once I move to California.

“Me?” I repeated, my eyebrows lowering. “She has me.”

Mrs. Barnes leveled an uncharacteristically stern look at me, like I was Lily and I was telling her that I definitely had not eaten a cookie without permission and I didn’t know how I’d gotten chocolate smeared across my face. I squelched the urge to swipe my hand guiltily across my mouth to make sure there was no evidence. I was a grown man for fucks sake. I paid this woman’s salary. She couldn’t intimidate me.

“She’s going to need more of you,” Mrs. Barnes said sternly. “She has to become your priority.”

“She is my priority,” I snapped. No one on the planet was more important to me than my daughter. I worked my ass off to give her the life she deserved.

Mrs. Barnes’ gaze didn’t soften. “Lily doesn’t need you to make another million-dollar bonus, David. She needs you to make her breakfast in the morning and help her with her homework after dinner.”

“I can do both.”

“Maybe. But if you have to choose...” she trailed off meaningfully.

“Then obviously I’ll choose her.” I could hear the snap still in my voice, and I was impressed by Mrs. Barnes’ ability to stare me down. I’d broken the gazes of a dozen hard bitten characters with that tone of voice.

“See that you do,” she said finally, and swept from the room.

I stared after her, wondering if I had just lost a stare down for the first time in my life. Then, unwillingly, her message trickled deeper into my brain.

Had I always chosen Lily?

I contemplated it for an uncomfortable minute, then shoved it away. Hell yes I’d always chosen her. I’d done so by making sure she had the best damn nanny in the country, and now I’d make sure she had the second best.

Another nice grandmotherly figure like Mrs. Barnes.

End of Preview...

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Annie J. Rose is a contemporary romance author who loves to bring all your fantasies to life. She writes steamy romance with a happily ever after.

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